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The Princeton Theological Review

a journal by students of Princeton Theological Seminary, issue 5/6

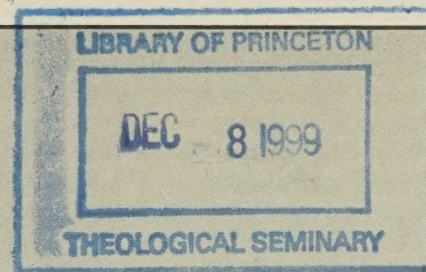
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that the light of God's truth may shine bright and increase

DOUBLE ISSUE

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*Stand at the crossroads and look
Ask for the old paths, where the good way is
Walk in it, and find rest for your souls
JEREMIAH 6:16*

The Princeton Theological Review

Dedicated to the Rev. Dr. Charles Hodge (1797-1878)

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1. All manuscripts (except book reviews) should be addressed to the General Editor.
2. Except for book reviews, authors must submit **3 copies** of their manuscript for review together with a 3.5 inch IBM or Macintosh diskette containing the manuscript as a document file.
3. All manuscripts should be typed double-spaced on good quality 8 1/2 x 11 paper (computer copies should be printed letter-quality).
4. References and footnotes should follow a consistent format (refer to the Chicago Manual of Style).
5. The typical length of an article should be between 2000 and 4000 words. This word limit is not etched in stone.
6. Book reviews should be addressed to the Book Review Editor. Except for extended critical reviews, book reviews should not exceed 1000 words. Please include a 3.5 inch IBM or Macintosh diskette containing the book review as a document file.
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From the Editors

Dedication

The editors of the PTR wish to dedicate this issue to the memory of **Russ Esty**. Fred Russell Esty was a giant of the faith—his knowledge of the Scriptures was phenomenal. He was particularly concerned with the recovery of biblical emphasis at Presbyterian seminaries.

A Double Issue

As a double issue, this issue is twice the length of a normal issue. Our intention remains to publish four issues per academic year. But since we are a student-run publication, this is not always possible. We intend to get still one more issue out before the end of this academic year (prospective authors please submit your manuscripts ASAP).

Why the Charles Hodge Society? Why the *Princeton Theological Review*?

"Why are you here?" "What are your intentions?" "Why don't you just leave well enough alone?" Questions like these are often addressed to the editors of the *Princeton Theological Review*, and to members of the Charles Hodge Society. The *Review* is often charged with attempting to "repristinate" uncritically the theology of Charles Hodge. This charge is simply unfounded. We are not content merely to live in the past, but seek actively to engage the present.

The editors of this journal hold many beliefs in common, but differ on many others as well. Those which motivate the publishing of this journal might be reduced to two: (1) *The Gospel is true*, and (2) *One should defend what one believes to be true*. Happily, many on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary affirm (1) at least in principle (though what exactly is meant by the Gospel is itself a matter that requires clarification). But many are reticent about—if not downright hostile to—(2). In contrast, the Charles Hodge Society and the PTR exist to clarify the Gospel and defend it rigorously.

Are we being machiavellian? Do we have an attitude? Are we simply behind the times? We think none of these labels appropriately describe us. Rather, we would turn the question around: Why is it that Hodge and Old Princeton are usually either ignored, or, if they are mentioned at all, are typically cited as glaring examples of bad theology (Prof. James Kay's favorable comments in CM320 about Hodge's liturgical theology provide a refreshing exception)? Why aren't the Old Princetonians at least *read*? Is it their antiquity? If antiquity were a good excuse to stop reading, then we should stop reading Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. Is it then their obsolescence? This too doesn't wash. Is there anybody who wants to argue, say, that Hegel got it basically right? Probably not. But even if he didn't, this still wouldn't be an excuse for ignoring him. There are plenty of obsolete, and even anti-Christian ideas, that receive time at this seminary. Why then is Charles Hodge, the most influential American reformed theologian (and Princetonian to boot), consigned to obscurity at his own alma mater? If Hodge is wrong, then he is gloriously wrong. If Hodge is wrong, then his mistakes deserve a first-hand reading.

The Charles Hodge Society is charged with attempting to repristinate Old Princeton. But why don't we find others at this seminary charged with attempting to "repristinate," say, *Marxism* (a discredited philosophy *par excellence*) when Marxist social analysis or economic assumptions are blithely presented in our courses? Why of all people should Charles Hodge invoke such disdain at Princeton Theological Seminary? Why are his ideas not accorded the same provisional status as any others, and given a shelf space in our blooming, buzzing marketplace of ideas? Why is the discipline of apologetics, one which Hodge championed, glaringly absent from our seminary curriculum? We leave these questions for our readers to ponder. The Charles Hodge Society and PTR exist because these questions have yet to be adequately answered.

A *Princeton Theological Review* Wish List

Institutions are dynamic entities. As such they can never escape the need for examination and improvement. Out of love for Princeton Theological Seminary—what it has been, what it is, and what it can become—the editors of the PTR offer the following recommendations for change at Princeton Seminary. If we take the motto "reformed and always reforming" as our own, let us begin with ourselves. Here then are our recommendations. We offer them provisionally as a way of facilitating discussion.

(1) Because PTS is a Christian seminary, its primary purpose is to train ministers to serve the Church. Every student should therefore pass a Bible content examination no easier than the one presently administered to Presbyterian candidates for ministry in order to be admitted to the seminary. PTS is not the place to get the ABCs of Biblical knowledge, still less a place to "find yourself." Ideally, every student would enter seminary having read through the entire Bible several times. Imagine a Jewish child aspiring to become a Rabbi without ever having read the Torah in full or learning Hebrew. Imagine a Muslim mullah who had not read the holy Quran before commencing his studies. How can someone aspire to be a minister of the Gospel without having read several times the book from which he or she will be expected to preach?

We don't think this requirement is unduly restrictive. Many of our congregations are scripturally illiterate. Without literate pastors, this lamentable condition will only worsen. Our time at seminary is short. Those who enter without an adequate background knowledge of Scripture are not only at a disadvantage vis-a-vis those who do, but their presence decreases the rigor and depth of the course work. This is not elitist. It is common sense. Is it too much to ask that an admitted student have read the entire Bible at least three times and pass a reasonably comprehensive Bible content examination? Those who fail could reapply once they have acquired the basic background in their own churches.

Without an adequate background in Scripture, students will be less critical in assessing what the professors and assigned textbooks prescribe. (We know first hand that most students do not have time to do outside reading—even if they have the inclination.) Basic knowledge and competence in Scripture is requisite for getting a theological education. Instead of struggling through the first year trying to learn

the books of the Bible and other basic Bible facts, one will be freed to pursue deeper questions. Moreover, one will have sufficient knowledge to grapple effectively with claims by professors and textbooks, which otherwise might come off as indoctrination.

(2) Given a mere twelve weeks of instruction per academic term, why do we have a fall term which looms drearily over the Christmas break? Why do we not start earlier in the year, finish the fall term before Christmas, and have a January interim when different electives could be offered (e.g., polity courses and GM)? Surely there are good reasons why similar institutions have gone to this format. We have no obligation to Princeton University to follow their schedule. Students who cross-register will simply have to adjust their schedules accordingly. M.Div. students are run ragged here with the number of courses they have to take. Let's make Christmas a real vacation!

(3) Regarding course content: an M.Div. student should be required to take at least two courses on one of the great theologians of the Church to gain some depth of theological insight. The list of theologians might be limited to eight. As a Reformed seminary, most of these should come from the classical and Reformed tradition. A few others would give it ecumenical balance. Luther, Calvin, Barth, Hodge, Augustine, Aquinas, Newman, and Chrysostom would be reasonable choices. There could be an introductory lecture course in the theologian, followed by one in greater depth, perhaps in a seminar format.

In line with this change, the introduction to theology (TH201 & TH202) should be reduced back to one semester (as it once was). Moreover, the introduction to theology should focus on systematic theology proper, and not on comparative theology, which is how it is currently being taught. Liberationist, feminist, and process theologies have their place. But a course which consists primarily of sampling different theologies, as our TH201 and TH202 currently do, hardly deserves the title "Systematic Theology." It is singularly unhelpful for aspiring ministers to study the latest theologies that are hot off the presses and that often pride themselves in subverting the Christian tradition, when these same aspiring ministers have no sense of what these "wet ink theologies" are responding to. By both studying systematic theology proper and mastering one great theologian who has stood the test of time, the student would be equipped to appropriate and evaluate the contemporary theologies. This is plain pedagogy.

(4) Faculty and students should confess the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds without reservation and be examined on their beliefs concerning each of their clauses. The universal Church has for fifteen centuries upheld the Nicene Creed as the basic confession of what it is to be a Christian. Moreover, the claims of the Apostles' Creed are indispensable to any coherent formulation of the Gospel. If we are to remain in communion with the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us, we must confess the same core faith that they confessed. Agreement on these two creeds would facilitate an ecumenism worthy of the name. But ecumenicity without the solid theological groundwork laid by these creeds is a pipedream.

(5) Finally, if we are serious about diversity on this campus, then let us act the part. Feminist, liberationist,

modernist, poststructuralist, multiculturalist, sociological, and narrative scholars are the fashion. What is conspicuously absent from this list is evangelicalism (and here we include the confessional orthodoxy of the Reformed tradition). When was the last time an evangelical scholar was invited to give the Stone or Warfield Lectures? Why is the number of evangelical scholars on our faculty—those who affirm the full reliability of the Scriptures, accept the virgin birth, and do not buy the universalism that is so rampant here—so disproportionately small? The mainline denominations are dying and evangelicals are taking up the slack. It's no secret that evangelicalism is a major voice in the church. Why then is evangelicalism so systematically excluded from polite conversation at Princeton Seminary? Where has the concern for genuine diversity gone? Why should so significant a branch of Christianity be effectively excluded from this institution and its curriculum?

We do not have to wait for faculty to retire before hiring evangelicals. By comparison with top private colleges, the faculty-student ratio here at Princeton Seminary is running low and can easily be increased (this is especially the case given the large number of faculty that at any one time are on sabbatical). Given an institutional endowment approaching half a billion dollars, the addition of more faculty ought not to constitute a hardship.

Call for Articles & Letters

The PTR seeks to publish substantive articles on theological subjects ranging in length between 2000 and 4000 words. This word limit is not etched in stone (our reprints of lectures from the apologetics seminar, for instance, will be in the 6000 word range). Nor is it required that the articles be narrowly theological. Philosophy, science, literary theory, history, and indeed any discipline that touches significantly on theology are fair game. We do, however, desire that the articles we publish set out a rigorous argument and be meaningfully in conversation with classic Christian orthodoxy. A dialogue format in which authors with divergent views meet in advance, and write their articles in response to one another would be especially desirable (cf. Paul La Montagne's article and the two responses to it in this issue).

We also encourage letters to the editor, both sympathetic and unsympathetic. Many of the letters we receive favor our efforts to recall the great Princetonians of the past. Nonetheless, we are not content merely to live in the past, but seek an active engagement with the present. We therefore would prefer to publish letters critical of our work in the pages of the PTR rather than seeing such letters appear in other campus publications, such as the *Testament*.

I really think that in our days it is the "undogmatic" and "liberal" people who call themselves Christians that are the most arrogant and intolerant. I expect justice and even courtesy from many atheists. . . .

—letters of C. S. Lewis

Presbyterian Confessionalism, Cultural Diversity, and the Problem of Christian Identity

D. G. Hart

Westminster Theological Seminary

In 1929 Princeton Theological Seminary was reorganized. On the surface the purpose of reorganization was to fix besetting administrative difficulties. So to streamline the seminary's bureaucracy the General Assembly of the PCUSA consolidated the board of trustees and the board of directors into one governing body. Yet, anyone who knows about the ecclesiastical battles of the 1920s — also known as the modernist-fundamentalist controversy — would be justified in seeing some connection between the reorganization of Princeton Seminary and the debates between liberal and conservative Presbyterians. Indeed, the PCUSA also decided to reorganize Princeton because a number of its faculty, especially the belligerent J. Gresham Machen, were outspokenly critical of theological liberalism and the way church agencies tolerated theological pluralism. Even though church administrators didn't want to take sides in the battle between liberals and conservatives, their decision to reorganize Princeton in effect was a capitulation to the liberal party in the church. For one of the rationales for altering the administration of the seminary was to make it more inclusive. Historically a seminary which adhered and defended strict Calvinism, Princeton Seminary would now be more sensitive to and reflect the theological diversity of the PCUSA.

Probably the best statement of the denomination's self-understanding of doctrinal pluralism came in a report to the 1926 General Assembly which read that, despite "wide geographical distances," "varying racial roots," "every extreme of difference in residence and education, in social contacts and life-long customs," the Presbyterian church was a body with "one heart beating at the center of its corporate life, bound together by the firm ties of a shining record . . . of a faith engaging the rich loyalties and abundant labors of the present, and of a hope . . . of a fairer future."

Thus, one of the most influential denominations in mainstream American Protestantism attempted to address the problems of diversity and unity almost seven decades ago in terms remarkably similar to those which fuel discussions in the academy about multi-culturalism and political correctness. Rather than concede the significance of intellectual, cultural, or socio-economic differences, a concession which often requires separate organizations and communities to preserve specific convictions or commitments, Americans generally try to keep such differences within one umbrella institution, whether it be the church or the nation-state. Such efforts to accommodate diversity admirably recognize the important matters that divide people from each other. But the way Americans have typically handled such diversity is fraught with problems. The American motto, *e pluribus unum*, while well-

intentioned can be incredibly naive about the nature of cultural differences and remarkably coercive in trying to make diverse groups into one people. The PCUSA's efforts to keep the denomination together during the 1920s and 1930s fit exactly this pattern. Rather than recognizing the incompatibility between various segments of the church, such as liberals and conservatives, the denomination chose instead to preserve unity by acknowledging the benefits of diversity. Whether this kind of response to diversity has contributed to the much discussed decline of mainline Protestantism is a question open for debate. But it is fairly clear that efforts to harmonize differences in this way has seriously undermined the theological witness of the mainline churches, notwithstanding the 1994 General Assembly's proclamation that, hope against hope, "theology matters."

Yet, mainline Presbyterians are not the only ones having trouble reconciling religious diversity. Conservative Presbyterian and Reformed bodies like the Presbyterian Church in America, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and the Christian Reformed Church have also experienced difficulties trying to accommodate a range of opinions on a number of issues. These denominations have in recent years also resorted to the language of the diversity and pluralism. This is evident in the arena of home missions where church leaders, sensing a dwindling share in America's religious market, have concocted a variety of means to be seeker-friendly to different segments of the American population. It is also evident in the worship wars where apparently the young are divided against the old, urbanites against suburbanites, whites against African-Americans, and contemporary styles against traditional forms. This state of affairs among Presbyterians, whether conservative or mainline, reflects a serious misunderstanding of the task of the church, the nature of cultural diversity, and above all, a believer's identity in Christ. What follows are some thoughts about Christian witness and cultural diversity the aim of which is not merely to question the accepted verities surrounding contemporary discussions of multi-culturalism but also to call the followers of Christ, especially the Presbyterian variety, to greater faithfulness.

To judge by some of the declarations and programs of various Presbyterian and Reformed denominations and church leaders one might be tempted to conclude that Calvinists are one of the most dominant groups in American society. Why, after all, do so many of these historically white churches make special efforts to plant ethnic churches (as if Anglo-Americans and Dutch Americans aren't ethnic) and recruit minorities into positions of church leadership? At seminaries, for instance, programs have been established for starting churches that do not conform to the suburban parish model and curricula have been altered to make room for the expressions of minority believers. Liturgical changes have also come about because of the perception that traditional Presbyterian worship is merely the expression of the dominant white culture in the United States. The word, "male," probably should be added before the word "white," in the previous sentence because of the historic barring of ecclesiastical office to women in Presbyterian and Reformed communions until the twentieth century. Which is only to say that one aspect of the rationale to ordain women has

been to make the church more reflective of the diversity of the American population. These examples of Presbyterians trying to accommodate so-called "minority" perspectives (women hardly constitute a minority in the United States) typify an effort to retreat from and make up for a close identification with the majority culture in United States and for the exclusion of minority cultures.

To put this way of thinking in perspective it might be helpful to be reminded of the membership statistics of the Presbyterian and Reformed communions. The Presbyterian churches in the United States and Canada comprise an inclusive membership of roughly four-and-one-half million. This figure can hardly be used to construe North American Presbyterians as a majority group, at least statistically. Yet the notion continues to prevail among Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, whether they belong to the National Council of Churches or to the National Association of Evangelicals, that they are part of the majority culture in America and that the theology they profess is nothing more than the peculiar way that white middle-class folk express their faith. What the statistics demonstrate, however, is that the Reformed faith, the convictions which are supposed to inform Presbyterian and Reformed churches, is numerically less significant than Jewish ethnicity (Jews number approximately 6.9 million in North America). And anyone who has followed the meteoric rise of Bill Hybels and Willow Creek Community Church in the suburbs of Chicago knows that Reformed theology is hardly what appeals to white middle-class folk. If it did then pastor Hybels would be spoon feeding the Westminster Shorter Catechism to the suburbanites that flock to Willow Creek (which, in case you are wondering, he is not). A better picture of the current status of the Reformed tradition is the one offered by H. L. Mencken who wrote that Presbyterians (this goes for mainliners and sideliners) have turned the church into little more than a literary club or a political lobby that reflects middle-class tastes and interests, long on sentimentality and humanitarianism but short on theology.

The point here is that if Presbyterians were really interested in protecting the perspectives of minorities they might take a little more care with their own profession of faith. Granted, real theological diversity exists among the various denominations that call themselves Presbyterian or Reformed. But the creeds that inform those churches are remarkably small in number and cohesive in outlook. And, more to the point, the convictions in those creeds are hardly shared by a large portion of the American population, even if all the members of all the Presbyterian and Reformed denominations adhered strictly to them. In other words, to be Presbyterian or Reformed in the United States at the end of the twentieth-century is to be a member of a minority group. If this is the case, then it doesn't make a whole lot

of sense for Presbyterians and Reformed to make concerted efforts to accommodate the perspectives of other minorities. They already constitute a minority and probably should be as worried as other "outsider" groups about retaining their identity and practices.

The problem, of course, with this line of argument is that it smacks of intolerance and exclusion. It may be one thing for Presbyterian and Reformed groups to constitute a minority, but do they have to cultivate a minority status and perspective, especially if that makes the church operate on a narrow ground and inhospitable to outsiders? Shouldn't the church be a place that welcomes all peoples? In other words, if the church nurtures a sense that its members are different from other people, whether on the basis of confession or some other criteria, won't the church turn out to be sectarian and socially divisive? The problem with churches, and religion for that matter, many believe, is that they breed prejudice, if not hatred, and thus facilitate the kind of antagonism and mistrust that faith is supposed to undo and that liberal democracy requires.

The difficulty with thinking about the church as an agency of social harmony, however, is twofold. First, regarding the church as a social institution misconstrues the nature and purpose of the church. Christ's instruction to his disciples, for instance, that unless they hated their father and mother they could not be his true followers (Luke 14:26) is a bracing

Tradition is democracy extended through time. Tradition means giving the vote to that most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. Tradition is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who are walking about.

—G.K. Chesterton

alternative to much of contemporary Protestantism, whether evangelical or mainline, which reduces faith in Christ to being nice, sincere and tolerant. One need not be a fundamentalist to see the separatistic implications of such teaching for the way we think of the relationship between the church and culture. As Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon argue, the church is called to be a separate people. The very word, "ecclesia," suggests as much. For this reason, they contend that the nature of the church is to be a colony in the midst of an alien culture, "a place where the values of home are reiterated and passed on to the young, a place where the distinctive language and life-style of the resident aliens are lovingly nurtured and reinforced."

To be sure, this conception of the church seems to make the gospel socially and politically irrelevant. But the point of the gospel is not whether it is socially useful or produces pleasant individuals. Rather, the issue is one of faithfulness. And the church is called to do something that no other institution can do, that is, to proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. If the church substitutes any other message, no matter how politically advantageous it might be, the church has been unfaithful in its duties. As Peter Berger has written, faith in Christ is normative for the church and the church is the community that embodies this faith. "Apostasy occurs when any other content is deemed to be constitutive of the Christian

community." "The mission of the church is not to legitimate any status quo *or* any putative alteration of the status quo," he adds. "The vocation of the church is to proclaim the Gospel, not to defend the American way of life, not to 'build socialism,' not even to 'build a just society.'" "

Second, to view the church as a means of arriving at a more harmonious public realm is to forget just how divisive religion is and has been throughout human history. We only need to think of Bosnia and the religious wars of the seventeenth century to see the problems of making the church the basis for civic cooperation and cultural identity. Christianity makes claims of an ultimate nature upon the lives of believers, that is, the kind of ultimacy which produces martyrs and theocrats. The mainstream Protestant project in the United States, however, has been to try to retain the good will of the second table of the decalogue without all of the baggage of the first four commandments about worship and idolatry. Since World War II this has been increasingly true in the heartland of evangelical Protestantism as well, where fears about the moral degeneracy of America have replaced zeal for orthodox faith and practice. As H. L. Mencken argued, by reducing religion "to a series of sweet attitudes, possible to anyone not actually in jail for felony" American Protestants had stripped religion of its significance. If Christianity is nothing more than people "getting along" then why should people who already get along join the church? But, if Christianity does make claims that transcend the demands of civility and politeness — claims that distinguish the saved from the lost — then the Christian religion may not be the best foundation for reconciling cultural, political economic and sexual diversity.

Thus, those who would use the church to negotiate cultural diversity fail to understand the nature of culture as much as they misunderstand the mission of the church. Many who celebrate multi-culturalism do so in a remarkably naive fashion. They fail to see that genuine cultural diversity, a diversity that allows different groups to maintain separate identities, may actually breed antagonism and division, not social unity. Usually, what counts for culture to those who welcome diversity is no more than the thin culture of the American consumer who wears Italian shoes, buys Native American rugs, and eats Thai food. The more difficult project of reconciling Italian, Native American and Thai cultures is nowhere to be found (most likely because it is impossible). At the same time, the church in the United States does not reduce cultural differences but may actually contribute to them. For if the church is a separate institution with a distinct identity, a colony of resident aliens as it were, then Christianity may actually contribute to greater diversity. The point of the gospel may not be to reconcile diverse peoples in the way that nation-states have tried, but rather, because of its exclusive demands for faithfulness, may, as Christ himself suggested, be so divisive as to threaten even the most intimate relationships between husbands and wives and between parents and children.

While Protestant accommodation of cultural diversity has obscured the mission of the church and the nature of culture, it has also promoted sloppy thinking about the

character of Christian identity. The conclusion to the second chapter of the book of Hebrews, for instance, tells us that Christ became like us in every respect except for sin in order that he could become the perfect high priest. This is a remarkable teaching because it flies directly in face of contemporary wisdom about the nature of human and Christian identity. Few Christians who champion the various forms of multi-culturalism seem aware of the tension between the politics of identity and the idea which lies at the foundation of the Christian faith — that is, that a single, heterosexual, male Jew who lived two millennia ago in Palestine has something in common not only with believers but with all humankind whatever their race, class or gender. Yet, in this age of almost unanimous affirmations of diversity we must remember that the Christian religion teaches that the second person of the trinity took human form and in doing so became just like us. Indeed, the doctrine of the incarnation directly contradicts the prevailing orthodoxy of race, gender and sexual preference which dominates American universities particularly and the culture more generally.

While it might be surprising that Christians would capitulate to multi-culturalism, even more remarkable is the way that Christianity defies the outlook of our time. What is particularly poignant about the doctrine of the incarnation is the location of the universality of Jesus' experience. Because of the apparently wide distance between Jesus and us, our temptation is to locate the universality of Christ's experience in his divinity. We might think that by transcending the particularities of the human condition, Christ in his divine nature — not in his ethnicity, gender or class — identified with and represented the variety and diversity of human experience. Yet according to Christian teaching, it was precisely in his human nature that Christ was able, as author of Hebrews writes, to be made like us, to be tempted as we are, and to know our infirmities. According to Christian teaching, it is the spiritual dimension of human existence which transcends the parochialism of identity that balkanizes modern culture. Consequently, when Christians confess that the son of God was conceived by the Holy Ghost and was born of the Virgin Mary we put our trust in the fact that the experience of Jesus Christ — his encounter with the demands of God's law, his temptation to disobey God's revealed will, his experience of the sinfulness and misery of the human condition — was in some fundamental way the same as that today of a married, African-American female attorney living in Anaheim or a male, Korean-American shop owner working on the lower east side of Manhattan.

This teaching has a significant implication for Christian witness and practice. The ultimate aspect of the human condition or personal identity is what connects us to the God who took human form. Race, class and gender may assist or impede one's efforts to secure a job within a university or the federal government, and these physical traits do surely affect how our neighbors and colleagues perceive and treat us. But Christ did not come merely or directly to liberate individuals from the barriers created by political economy or from the prejudices which are buried deep within the soul of Western European culture. He did not experience corporate capitalism, the industrial revolution or the rise and fall of

Christendom in the West and so could not know in his human nature our experience of it. Rather Christ took human form and was tempted to disobey God's law in the same way that we are tempted. He became just like us except without sin.

The incarnation teaches that what matters most in human experience is what is universal to the human condition. Christians confess that Jesus Christ knew what we experience not in our quest for political recognition or material security but rather in our temptation to sin. Political

economies come and go, but what transcends them all is the fellowship between God and his creatures and the rupture of that fellowship because of our depravity. Indeed, the incarnation with its teaching that Christ knew our feebleness and frailty should be a warning against allowing the categories of race, class and gender to trump the doctrines of sin and grace. While the situatedness of human existence and the demands of local and international politics call attention to the differences between men and women, Christians must never lose sight of the universal and higher truths of spiritual life which have been revealed within the particularities of human culture.

Thus, Christianity offers a marvelous antidote to the follies of our efforts to grapple with cultural diversity. Christ's identification with us makes our fixation upon the politics of identity and our current understanding of individual self-worth look trivial by comparison. A white man may not know the experience of a black female. And whites may not appear to be victims of the oppression to which minorities have been subject in North America. But the gospel says that all have sinned, that all people suffer from the oppression of guilt before God's holy law, and that Christ identified with this oppression by being tempted as we are and by bearing the guilt of our sins upon the cross. We are on slim ground if we let the characteristics of race, class and gender undermine or obscure this truth. For Christ, who is supposed to have been like us in all things, except for sin, is far removed from us if we follow the logic of multi-culturalism which says that the only thing a single, male, Jew who lived in first-century Palestine has in common with Americans living in the late twentieth-century is, at best, a pulse. If Christ is different from us, then he really could not have identified with us and cannot set us free from our guilt and misery.

This is not to deny that the physical characteristics and cultural attributes that separate us from one another are real and affect our earthly existence in positive and negative ways. But we must not let these differences obscure our common creation in God's image, our shared guilt before God's righteous law, and our salvation through the second Adam. Despite all the physical and social attributes that separate us from Christ, if we cease to confess that Jesus was tempted as we are, that he knew what was fundamental

to our experience as men and women created in the image of God, and if we allow that African-Americans understand the gospel differently from whites, that women understand the gospel differently from men, that Koreans understand the

gospel differently from Chinese, and so on, then we have implicitly denied Christ's identification with us. And if we deny that truth then we are a people without hope.

As unlikely as it seems, Christ the bachelor, Christ the carpenter, Christ the Jew became like us in every way like us

Theologians are not infallible in the interpretation of *Scripture*. It may . . . happen in the future, as it has in the past, that interpretations of the Bible, long confidently received, must be modified or abandoned. . . . This change of view as to the true meaning of the Bible may be a painful trial to the Church.

—Charles Hodge

except for sin. This is the truth that multi-culturalism misses with its narrow fixation on physical characteristics and economic determinants. And this is the truth the church abandons if in the interest of relevance and influence it substitutes a naive celebration of cultural diversity for proclamation of the good news that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free.

The problem for Presbyterian confessionalists, however, is that while in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, or slave nor free, there are Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists and Mennonites. Indeed, despite the gospel's teaching that as believers our identity is in Christ, thus implying if not commanding the unity of the church, the history of Christianity is littered with splits and divisions such that it is seemingly impossible to talk about "the church" without immediately asking "which church?" Appeals to the simple teachings of the Apostles' Creed will not overcome the divisions in Christendom. If the 1994 General Assembly of the PCUSA was at all serious in its declaration that "theology matters," then the theological differences that separate Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox, and that divide the Protestant fold will not go away.

What then should be made of the disunity of the body of Christ? Is it a problem similar to that of the cultural diversity we experience in the United States? Should a proper approach to the problem be one of assimilation or that of principle pluralism? And if our ultimate identity is in Christ, if race, gender and class do not matter in Christ, does Presbyterianism fare any better? Should Presbyterians, for instance, be all that adamant about holding on to the particularities of the Reformed tradition and thereby forsake communion with Christians in other traditions? These are not by any means simple questions and any effort to answer them in a couple of paragraphs is as foolish as it is vain. Still, several issues need to be kept in mind if we are going to think clearly about pluralism in the church and its relation to diversity in the culture.

First, we need to be discerning about what we mean by the unity and disunity of the church. Presbyterian confessionalists have long maintained that simply to be outside the Presbyterian church does not mean that one is not a Christian. Too often in discussions about church

unity the proponents of such schemes try to paint their opponents into the box of saying that non-Presbyterians are not real Christians. But this is an unfair charge. Those Presbyterians who have been the most ardent about the distinctives of Presbyterianism have also recognized the genuine Christianity professed by believers in other Protestant denominations. Here the formula for admission to the Lord's Supper is instructive. Members of non-Presbyterian evangelical (i.e. Protestant) churches are encouraged to participate in the sacrament even in the most narrow of Presbyterian communions. Which is only to say that Presbyterians believe that Baptists, Methodists, etc. are Christian churches. The ministers in non-Presbyterian communions would not be allowed to serve in Presbyterian pulpits (at least this used to be the case prior to the twentieth century) because of important theological differences regarding word, sacrament, polity and worship. But Presbyterians have regarded non-Presbyterians as Christian.

Once Presbyterians recognize the credibility of other Christian professions, the question then usually arises about the need for separate communions. If we are one in Christ, why don't we belong to the same church? Here Presbyterian convictions about the task of the church and liberty of conscience are helpful. If the responsibility of the church is to witness to Christ in all the fullness of God's special revelation then there has to be some mechanism for allowing for such a complete witness. The mechanism that Protestants have come up with is that of denominationalism, a way of allowing the freedom necessary for Protestant traditions to articulate and explain their particular understanding of Christ in all of its implications. Denominationalism, then, is a way of recognizing that theology matters, that churches have a duty to witness to Christ in a way that goes beyond the simple statements of mere Christianity. It is also a way of protecting the liberty of conscience. To make Methodists assent to Calvinistic teachings regarding human depravity and church polity would be to bind the conscience of such believers on matters where they believe the Bible teaches differently. Too often, however, the process of church unity has not been properly respectful of liberty of conscience and has imposed a consensus understanding of Christianity upon believers who continue to defend the truth of their communion's creed and polity. Ironically, then, it is the opponents of church union who often end up being the most respectful of diversity in the body of Christ because they recognize the real differences that separate various communions rather than trying to skirt those differences with a lowest-common-denominator theology. In other words, the most zealous defenders of Presbyterian confessionalism may turn out to be the most respectful of those who differ because they see clearly and accept the differences that divide. In contrast, the most broadminded may turn out to be the most narrow because of their failure to admit to real differences of conviction.

The mention of a reduced Christian creed which will appeal to the greatest number of communions raises another important consideration regarding unity and diversity in Christ. In American church history one of the greatest impulses fueling church union and interchurch cooperation has been a desire to make the United States a more Christian

society, sometimes read, "just society." In the late nineteenth century when Protestants set into motion the modern ecumenical machinery the basis for union was not a resolution of long standing differences concerning soteriology, sacramental theology or ecclesiology. Rather the terms of agreement had more to do with the greater influence Protestants could have through efficient cooperation in cleaning up the emerging urban-industrial complex. Such a platform for church union showed tellingly where the identity and loyalty of many Protestant church leaders was. What mattered most to many leaders in the ecumenical effort was not the theological witness of their respective communions to Christ but rather the moral fiber and social well-being of the United States.

Of course, Protestant ecumenists believed that cleaning up cities and breaking down barriers between labor and management went to the heart of the churches witness to Christ. But whether Protestant ecumenists were right in their judgments is beside the point. Rather, what is pertinent to questions about diversity and unity is the way ecumenists regarded their opponents. Leaders of church union have often been tempted to vilify dissenters as un-Christian because the unity of the church appears to be such a desirable end. But those who opposed church union did so not merely because of stubbornness or depravity but because they believe the proposed basis for unity compromised important teachings of Christianity. Which is only to say that any religious resolution no matter high-minded will not make those who disagree go away. The same lesson applies to the civic realm. Any public declaration which defines what it means to be an American beyond certain established laws and customs will not make those who disagree go away. If we are to address meaningfully the pluralism of the church as well as the diversity of culture, we have to recognize that unanimous agreement on vital issues which touch upon the identity of a church and a people will be impossible and some willingness to live with disagreement will be necessary. Unfortunately, the desirability of church union and national union has often made such willingness difficult. But the survival of genuine Christianity and of genuine culture depends upon a candid recognition of the diversity of the body of Christ (theology matters) as well as the differences of cultural expression. As R. Laurence Moore has written, "hostility is altogether normal in heterogeneous cultures." Learning how to handle the unfriendly feeling that arises from such religious and cultural heterogeneity is another matter.

With deep roots and firm *foundations*, may you be strong to grasp, with all God's people, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and to *know* it, though it is beyond knowledge.

Ephesians 3:18-19

Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Inspiration of Holy Scripture

D. Paul La Montagne

This lecture by Paul La Montagne and the two responses that follow it by Jay Richards and Jeff Finch were presented in the fall 1995 Apologetics Seminars at Princeton Theological Seminary. Our theme that fall was The Word of God. The interchange between Paul, Jay, and Jeff has marked the high point of the Apologetics Seminar. Because Paul La Montagne was responding to two of the earlier talks given at the Apologetics Seminar, we have decided to include these as well, one by Ray Cannata, the other by Bill Dembski.

—The Editors

In preparation for this talk I read the first two lectures in this series, Ray Cannata's lecture on "Old Princeton and the Doctrine of Scripture" and Bill Dembski on "The Problem of Error in Scripture." I enjoyed reading Ray's lecture very much. Ray is one of the most well read and thoughtful scholars in this particular part of church history that I know of. He brought to life in a lively and truthful fashion a position that is much caricatured. As he did so, as he healed my ignorance, I began to wonder why there has always been such a strong disagreement between this position and the position I take. I stand for a doctrine of revelation and of Holy Scripture which are, let us make no bones about it, very strongly influenced by Karl Barth.

I come here tonight in the hope of exploring some of the possible grounds for alliance and fellowship in inquiry that may exist between those who work in the school with Karl Barth and those who work in the school with the Old Princeton Theology. And I think that there are very serious grounds for such an alliance and such fellowship in inquiry. Bill Dembski spoke about the human constructivist perspective on Scripture, the idea that all Scripture is simply and solely a human construction. Thus Scripture is important because it is such a highly valued human construction, but has no divine sanction, no authority we do not give it, no ability to refer to realities beyond the scope of our own experience. I think that Bill is entirely right in saying that theology that has such a view of Scripture cannot be truly Christian. Christian theology always has the intention to refer to God as we know God in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even if there is no God and all we Christians are in error it is still the case that having this intention is a criteria of what Christian discourse is. Relative to all theology which denies or ignores this intention I think that Barth's doctrine of Holy Scripture and that of the Old Princeton School must be regarded as allies.

Nonetheless, there is a long tradition of disagreement between these two schools of theology, and I want to explore what that disagreement is. Partly that disagreement

is composed of misunderstandings, and partly of substantial issues. I would like to dispose of the misunderstandings first.

First of all, let me dispose of a misunderstanding on my part towards the inerrantist position. Bill Dembski mentioned in his lecture that he has always found handbooks which harmonize, justify and rationalize Biblical difficulties fruitless, leaving his most pressing questions unanswered. So, indeed, have I. But I made the mistake of supposing that such handbooks represented the essence of the inerrantist position. What I see in Ray's more careful exposition of the Old Princeton doctrine of Holy Scripture is that an inerrantist position is not wedded to literal interpretation. I had mistakenly identified the two, as I assume have many others. A commitment to the literal interpretation of the Bible is a position that Barth would have to reject, on the grounds that literal interpretation is not capable of bearing the full weight of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, a literal interpretation is sometimes a violation of the simple truth of the Biblical witness. God is God, and no human words have the power to refer to God simply and literally. God is God, and has the power to take up human words and use them to refer to God, but it is a gift of grace when God does this. It is not something that words can do of themselves, simply by what they are. But this is what literal interpretation implies.

Ray has made it clear that the Old Princeton position was much too careful, sophisticated, nuanced and well balanced to make this error. A full and proper respect was given to the full humanity of the writings which are the Scripture. Exegetical scholarship is trusted to determine what passages are intended metaphorically, and which are simple reporting. Moreover the passages that Ray quoted show that the Old Princeton theologians are well aware, even while they defend the inerrancy of the Scripture, that the words do not have the power to refer to God in and of themselves. It is only by God's gracious and miraculous act that the words refer to God.

I must say, however, that most of what I have seen in argument for an inerrantist doctrine of Scripture, until I read these two lectures by Ray Cannata and Bill Dembski, was, in fact, thoroughly mixed with an assumption of literal interpretation. And handbooks resolving Biblical difficulties make the mistake of accepting the world's notion of what an error is when they undertake to harmonize, justify and rationalize those difficulties. For this reason I found Bill's suggestion that we need to let the Scripture throw our own ideas of what error is into question very helpful. It is a very Barthian move. One of the things that Barth asserts in his doctrine of Scripture is the power of Scripture to eventually throw off every false interpretation. Barth does not think that we must somehow come to the Scripture without presuppositions, we come to the Scripture with whatever presuppositions we may have. But Scripture has the power to call our presuppositions into question, and in doing so force us to find new presuppositions to use in our exegetical work. It is this that makes me refer to what Bill did in his talk as a very Barthian move.

Now I want to deal with a misunderstanding of Barth that I found in the lectures by Bill and Ray. Bill proposes a three fold scheme for categorizing doctrines of Holy

Scripture, divine inspiration, human response, and human constructivist. As he admits, they are not the only categories that one can use, but they are adequate to his task then and to my task now. Bill puts Barth in the human response category. Let me quote Bill a little bit:

... it is also known as the neo-orthodox perspective, and is associated most prominently at this seminary with the name of Karl Barth. According to this perspective the human writers of Scripture do not so much experience the divine revelatory act as communication, as get hit over the head with it, and then try to figure out what happened. God acts, and human writers record their response (or "witness" as it is usually called) to the divine acts. . . . Thus the human response perspective does not reduce Scripture to a merely human construction, but retains an ineliminable transcendent element in Scripture the human writer of Scripture is responding not to some internal psychological state, but to the revelatory activity of a God whose existence does not depend upon whether we like it or not. Nevertheless, as a human response to a divine revelatory act, Scripture no longer constitutes the very words of God. Rather, Scripture constitutes a fallible human witness to what God has wrought in salvation history.

I think that Bill's characterization of the neo-orthodox understanding of Scripture is mostly correct. There are, of course, variations within neo-orthodoxy and a more complete description of the neo-orthodox position on Scripture would have to take them into account.

But for a brief statement and for the purpose which Bill had in mind his characterization is good enough.

The misunderstanding consists in putting Barth into this category. Barth was never a neo-orthodox theologian. Barth's doctrine of revelation, his doctrine of the threefold form of the word of God, and his doctrine of Holy Scripture are best understood in the category that Bill calls divine-inspiration.

Now, it is certainly true that Barth has long been regarded as one of the sources of neo-orthodoxy in the Anglo-American world. This reading of Barth is of such long standing in the historiography of theology in the twentieth century that I cannot hope to address and correct it in this little lecture here tonight. But I can direct you to Dr. Bruce McCormack's book on the development of Barth's theology in which he does address the problem of the neo-orthodox reading of Barth. (See McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 23-26.) From Dr. McCormack's perspective the Barth who was one of the sources of neo-orthodoxy was a product of a neo-orthodox reading of Barth. And as such it was a misreading of Barth.

But, as I say, that book is an attempt to introduce a whole new paradigm for how to read Barth, and an extended argument against the accepted paradigm. What I hope to do

tonight is simply to explain how Barth's doctrine of revelation, his doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God, and his doctrine of Holy Scripture are best understood in the category that Bill calls divine-inspiration.

Let us first consider Barth's doctrine of revelation. For Barth, the problem of revelation is the problem of theological epistemology. How is *Gotteserkenntnis*, knowledge of God, possible. The immediate answer is simple and straightforward. With human beings this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Knowledge of God is not a human possibility. Human words, human ideas, human thoughts, human concepts, human minds are not capable of knowing God. They are not capable of truly recognizing God as God. This is a product of two things. The first is that we are creatures and God is the creator. The finite is not capable of the infinite, a traditional Reformed slogan. As creatures, the creator is beyond our grasp. The second thing is human sin. Sin touches every part of our being, including our minds. Sin is the rejection of God, the setting up of ourselves in the place of God. The mind which rejects God cannot know God. This is a form of the traditional Reformed doctrine of total depravity.

Nevertheless, for all his negations, of which those who

wish to give Barth a post-modern reading are very fond, Barth is not explaining that knowledge of God is impossible, but rather asking how it is possible. He is asking how because he begins from the assumption that it is actual. If there is no actual knowledge of God then there is no

problem of how it is possible. It is because Barth recognizes and acknowledges the reality of the knowledge of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ among us for life, crucifixion, death and resurrection; because Barth recognizes and acknowledges the reality of the knowledge of God in the witness of the prophets and apostle's to Jesus Christ; because Barth recognizes and acknowledges the reality of the knowledge of God in the preaching and hearing of the Church that Barth asks the question how this is possible.

For Barth, the knowledge of God is a divine possibility. God knows God. Who else is capable of it? Who else is a competent witness? Who else can be sure that they are not mistaking fate, or the laws of the universe, or the mysterious depth of human experience for God. Only God can be trusted to make no error here. Knowledge of God is possible because God makes us to be participants in God's own knowledge of God. And this is nothing less than miracle, because it is not a natural human possibility. But this miracle means that God is the subject of the knowledge of God at all points in revelation. Even when God becomes an object of our knowledge God remains subject. As Jesus Christ, the object of revelation and human knowledge of God, God enters into human life as a subject. As a living acting subject, knowing God in the bond of the Holy Spirit,

Finally, as regards the *doctrine of inspiration*, it is not enough to believe in it; one must ask oneself: Am I expecting it? Will God speak to me in this Scripture?

—Karl Barth

Jesus lives and acts in such a way as to remain the subject of revelation, the subject performing the acts that we recognize and acknowledge as revelation. As Holy Scripture, the object of revelation and human knowledge of God, God remains the subject as the Holy Spirit who commands and utilizes the witness of the prophets and apostles in such a way that they become the Word of God. In the preaching and hearing of the Church, God remains the subject as the Holy Spirit in whose knowledge of God we participate when we hear the preached word as the Word of God. For these reasons I think that Barth's doctrine of revelation is best understood as a doctrine of inspiration.

As you must have already noticed we are now in the realm of Barth's doctrine of the threefold form of the word of God. The first form of the word of God is Jesus Christ, revelation itself, the Word of God become human. Apart from God's act of becoming a human being, living a human life, and in that human life fulfilling all obedience and knowing God as the Son knows the Father, there would be no human knowledge of God. The human knowing of God is first and foremost God's miraculous act of becoming a human being and as that human being knowing God. The miracle of revelation is part and parcel of the miracle of the incarnation, of the miracle of the atonement, of the miracle of the resurrection. It can be distinguished from them in thought, but it cannot be separated from them in actuality. Jesus Christ is not revelation itself, is not God with us, in and of himself as a human being. That would make him merely representative of a divinity which we all possess by nature. Jesus Christ is revelation itself and God with us in and by God's being and acting as this particular human being living this particular life and doing these particular acts. The person and the work of Christ are only distinguishable, but not separable.

The second form of the Word of God is the Holy Scripture, the witness of the prophets and apostles to Jesus Christ. This is the point at which neo-orthodoxy picked up on Barth and used him. Barth does characterize the Holy Scripture as witness. But the witness of the prophets and apostles is only the form of the Word of God in Holy Scripture. The substance and content of that witness is Jesus Christ, revelation itself. The witness of the prophets and apostles is filled with substance and content and meaning by God's act of adopting and adapting that witness, by God's act of commandeering and using that witness to give witness to God's self in revelation. Barth's characterization of the Holy Scripture as witness is not a characterization of it as only a human witness. The Holy Scripture is witness because God uses that human witness to give God's witness to God's act of revelation. And this is where Barth cannot be claimed by neo-orthodoxy. God does not merely hit people over the head with revelation in the exodus and the resurrection. God also gives witness to God's salvific act by acting in, with, and through the human witness to God's act in Jesus Christ. No merely human witness could possibly communicate, could possibly be witness to God's act in Jesus Christ. Unless God gives witness in, with and through the human witness, no witness is given.

In the same way, the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. This is also a traditional reformed position

going back at least to the Second Helvetic Confession. Moreover, Barth is careful, as are Calvin and the Scots Confession, to specify that it is the preaching and hearing of the Church that is referred to here. That hearing of the church is not possible as a mere human response to the proclamation of the witness to revelation of the prophets and apostles. God is also present in the hearing of the Church, making the church to participate in God's own knowledge of God by the miracle of faith when people recognize and acknowledge the word of God in the preaching of the church.

The complaint that is addressed to Barth at this point is that by making Jesus Christ to be revelation itself, and the Scripture only witness to that revelation, Barth has put revelation back to an inaccessible point and thus given the Scripture a secondary position that makes it subject to human standards and criteria. By what criteria shall we determine when the Scripture is God's witness and when it is only a human witness? I think that this complaint derives from a failure to recognize the radicality of Barth's position.

It is true that Scripture is put in a subordinate position. But what kind of subordinate position is it? Barth says that there is only one analogy to the threefold form of the Word of God. Or rather, more accurately, the doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God is itself the only analogy to something else. (CD I/1, pp 121-4) The threefold form of the Word of God is analogous to the triunity of God in the Trinity. This means that just as in the Trinity the subordination of the Son is not subordinate divinity, not lesser divinity, not the mistake of the Arians, but only the relationship of obedience of the Son to the Father, so also the subordination of the Scripture to Jesus Christ, does not make it any less the Word of God, but only the Word of God in a form that is obedient to that to which it witnesses. As the word of God the Scripture is never only a human witness. It is always a human witness, but it is never only a human witness. Moreover, it is important to remember in this respect that the Jesus Christ who is revelation itself is not for Barth an unknown Jesus Christ who hides behind the barrier of the years that separate us from his life on earth, nor is he the Jesus who is reconstructed by the standards of the historical sciences. The Jesus Christ who is revelation itself is always, for Barth, "Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture." (The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.11 in the *Book of Confessions*)

Thus, for Barth, the question of what criteria we shall use to determine when the Scripture is God's witness and when it is only a human witness does not arise in this form. There are no criteria whatsoever, no human criteria, by which this can be determined. It is God's own act of giving witness in, with and through the witness of the prophets and apostles that makes this witness to be God's own witness. And it is God's own act of calling forth faith in response to this witness that is the recognition and acknowledgement of it. No human criteria can serve this purpose, not even the assumption of the inerrancy of the Scripture. It is something which God must do. Moreover, Barth considers his own doctrine of the Word of God to stand under the same reservation. He says,

I was and am a regular theologian at whose disposal stands not the Word of God but at best a "doctrine of the

Word of God." ... I am not conscious of having done anything else than old? new theology? in any case theology, where the Word of God spoke for himself or did not speak when and where it pleased God. (Barth, *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, p. 8)

This is the critical point at which Barth's doctrine of revelation, of Holy Scripture, is different from and, quite possibly, opposed to the Old Princeton theology. Barth's doctrine is a doctrine of God's act of inspiring the Scripture. The Old Princeton theology seems to be a doctrine of the status of the Scripture as inspired. Barth will not go this route for it seems to him to be a violation of God's subjecthood in revelation. Barth's determination to respect the subjecthood of God in revelation is not a philosophical importation, but his response to the witness of Scripture. Where Moses, on the mountain at the burning bush, asks to know God's name God does indeed speak a name by which God is to be known among the people of Israel, but it is a name in which God refuses to be put at the disposal of those who invoke it, it is a name in which God asserts God's own inalienable subjecthood even in revelation, "I am who I am."

What Barth denies is that in being used by God to bear witness the words of the Scripture become the revealedness of God. The Scripture does not become the permanent, at human disposal, revealedness of God. The Scripture is the Word of God in God's act of bearing witness to God in and through the Scripture. The complaint may be raised, does this not move the Word of God back behind the Scripture so that we can never know when or if the Scripture is the Word of God. I think that there are two reasons to say no to this. The first is that we would only be justified in making this complaint if Barth left it hanging in the air whether or not God actually does this thing, act in the witness of Scripture to give witness to God's self. But Barth does not leave it hanging. He asserts over and over again that God did indeed use these words so in their origination, that God has used them so over and over again in the history of the Church, and that God has promised to do so yet again. To say that the Scripture is the Word of God actualistically is to say that not everything that people read and see in the Scripture is the Word of God. What the Church sees and hears in the Scripture is the Word of God when and as God speaks the Word of God in and through the Scripture, opening the eyes and ears of the Church to see and hear God speak. The second reason is that Barth does not advise us to approach the Scripture looking for it not to be the Word of God; he does not advise us to come to the Scripture looking for what in it is and is not the Word of God. On the contrary, that God has revealed God in this witness and has promised to do so yet again lays a burden of duty upon us theologians to seek to understand and interpret the Scripture under the

assumption that God is, indeed, speaking in and through the Scripture. The caution is a caution against making the self-righteous assumption that our interpretation is directly identical with the word that God is speaking.

Barth says that the model for the relationship between the human word of the Scripture and the word of God is precisely the identity between God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

As the Word of God in the sign of this prophetic-apostolic word of man Holy Scripture is like the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ. It is neither divine only, nor human only. Nor is it a mixture of the two

nor a *tertium quid* between them. But in its own way and degree it is very God and very man, i.e., a witness of revelation which itself belongs to revelation, and historically a very human document. (CD I/2, p. 501)

It is this model that permits Barth to say this about the inspiration of the Scripture.

When we speak of the inspiration of the Bible, or when we confess that the Bible is the Word of God, ... we have to think of a twofold

reality. ... If it is now true in time, as it is true in eternity, that the Bible is the Word of God, then, according to what we have just said, God himself now says what the text says. The work of God is done through this text. The miracle of God takes place in this text formed of human words. The text in all its humanity, including all the fallibility which belongs to it, is the object of this work and miracle. ... It is as such that it will speak and attest, and be read and heard: and the Word of God in and through it, not alongside or behind it, not in some place which we have to attain or create beyond the text. If God speaks to human beings, He really speaks the language of this concrete human word. That is the right and necessary truth in the concept of verbal inspiration. Verbal inspiration does not mean the infallibility of the biblical word in its linguistic, historical and theological character as a human word. It means that the fallible and faulty human word is as such used by God and has to be received and heard in spite of its human fallibility. (CD I/2, pp. 532-3)

For that reason every time we turn the Word of God into an infallible biblical word of man or the biblical word of man into an infallible Word of God we resist that which we ought never to resist, i.e., the truth of the miracle that here fallible human beings speak the Word of God in fallible human words and we therefore resist the sovereignty of grace, in which God became human in Christ. ... To the bold postulate that if their word (the word of the prophets and apostles) is to be the Word of God they must be inerrant in every word, we oppose the even bolder assertion, that according to the Scriptural witness about humanity, which applies to them too, they can be at fault in any word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet according to the

Let us understand *Holy Writ*, historically, yes, just as it is written. However, let us fire it well in the flame of the Holy Spirit and unfold with spiritual discernment whatever in it seems incongruous or obscure when taken literally.

—Jerome

same Scriptural witness, being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word. (CD I/2, pp. 529-30)

This is where the issue lies between Karl Barth and the Old Princeton theology. What I have attempted here is to at least demonstrate that it is an issue between two different schools which both hold to the inspiration of the Holy Scripture.

The actual argument over the point at issue here I would like to leave to the discussion which now follows.

Response to Paul La Montagne: *Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Inspiration of Holy Scripture*

Jay Wesley Richards

Paul's essay has made it very clear that the Barthian and traditionalist/Old Princeton views of Scripture are far closer to each other than either are to what Bill Dembski calls the "human constructivist" perspective. Both insist that the authority of Scripture be given primacy, and that God is truly revealed in its pages. Both views *intend* to refer to God. Also, there is clearly slippage between Barth's view and the general neo-orthodox view attributed to him. In a day when many in the church do not even seem to believe in God, Barth is in many ways an ally to the orthodox and evangelical Christian. Nevertheless, I would like to raise a few points in which I think there is still *tension* if not clear *disagreement* between Barth on the one hand and Old Princeton and the traditional view of Scripture on the other.

There are certain recognizably "Barthian" ways of speaking in Paul's paper which I think need some clarification. They tend to appear as what we might call "theological compliments." That is, they are usually asserted with the tacit motivation of respecting divine transcendence. As such, they can function to make the one who questions them appear to be impugning the divine majesty. So I proceed with caution.

In Paul's essay, this Barthian way of speaking (I put it this way only because it is on the lips of self-professed Barthians that I have encountered this argument) arises in his discussion about the literal interpretation of Scripture. What literal interpretation consists in is an important topic, but one I cannot engage here. What interests me here is the way Paul treats the referential quality of language. What exactly does it mean to say that "words do not have the power to refer to God in and of themselves," and that they refer only by God's gracious act? The apparent intent behind these words is to preserve divine transcendence. And of course nothing exists but for the grace of God broadly defined. But what does this particular claim mean? If I say "God is gracious" or "God transcends nature," does God sometimes swat these assertions out of the way so that somehow they don't refer? What if the fact of the matter is that God *is* gracious and that he *does* transcend nature? In such a case,

what sense does it make to say they don't refer, and how does this claim pay God any real compliment?

There seems to be a parasitic aspect to this claim, i.e., it seems to presuppose that there *is* something we can say of God. One could ask: Is it true that words don't refer to God unless God *makes* them do so? Or does this claim also sometimes fail to refer? But then sometimes it wouldn't be true, and sometimes words would refer even if God didn't do anything about them . . . This position, if not stated carefully, seems to be susceptible to a certain self-refutation. At the very least, this affirmation is very obscure, even if very commonly Barthian. And I am not sure if, say, Hodge would agree. If God does somehow make words refer which would not do so otherwise, why couldn't he sovereignly "make" the "literal words of Scripture" and the propositions of naive fundamentalists refer, even truly and accurately refer? I just don't see how this view resolves anything about theological language, or how it is preferable to the Old Princeton view (of course, I'm not arguing here that the Old Princeton strategy is the correct view of the matter, but only that this "Barthian" view is not clearly superior to it).

Analogous "theological compliments" occur elsewhere in Paul's paper. Barth said many things, and relating them is an arduous task. Nevertheless, often Barth does seem to say that human knowledge of God is impossible. Presumably one would only say this if one believed, as Barth and the Christian tradition have, that God *transcends* human categories and experience. But again, when put this way, this is not an obviously coherent claim. For one would have to *know* that God is transcendent, and that *transcendence* was a true attribute to God, in order to justifiably make this claim. But then some knowledge of God would be necessary, and some human word would have to be attributable to God to make this claim. So, when overstated, the affirmation of divine transcendence wanders into contradiction and self-referential incoherence.

Hodge, on the other hand, in considering these issues, insists on God's transcendence as well. He notes that, e.g., we have finite knowledge, and God has infinite knowledge. Nevertheless, God still has *knowledge*. When we say God is omniscient, this claim rightly refers. Right or wrong, Hodge's view of divine transcendence makes clear sense. I'm not convinced that this aspect of the Barthian view does.

Similarly, Barth often insists, as Paul (LaMontagne) points out, that apart from the incarnation, "there would be no human knowledge of God." Again, this sounds so christocentric, so conservative, so evangelical, that I must swallow hard before contesting it. But is this claim true? Is it consistent with the biblical witness? One wonders: What about Adam in Eden? What about Noah at Mt. Ararat, Abraham at Mt. Moriah, Moses at Mt. Sinai? Does not the entire New Testament presuppose the knowledge of God given to the Jews, which it then transforms in light of the incarnation and resurrection of the very Son of God? Moreover, Paul (the Apostle) seems very clear in Romans 1: 19ff. that something of God can and is known from *nature*, and that this is so by God's very design. He says in part: ". . . what may be known about God is plain to [human beings], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and invisible nature--have been clearly seen,

being understood from what has been made . . ." Barth had to go to great lengths to appear to accommodate this claim in his Romans commentary and in his *Dogmatics*. But it is not clear that he succeeded.

One last point: I believe any comparison of the views of Scripture of Old Princeton and Barth must take into account the influence of Thomas Reid and empiricism on the former and Immanuel Kant (and Kierkegaard) on the latter. I think Barth's own theological commitments would sanction the legitimacy of this crucial question: When Barth insists on our failure to know or speak of or refer to God, how much of his negotiation of these issues is due to the clear witness of Scripture, and how much of it descends from a peculiar *Kantian* overlay of Scripture and the Reformed and Christian tradition? I don't have a confident answer to this question in this response, but I think the answer to it is the heart of the matter in discerning Barth's view of Scripture.

I admonish every pious Christian that he take not offence at the plain, unvarnished manner of speech of the Bible. Let him reflect that what may seem trivial and vulgar to him, emanates from the high majesty, power, and wisdom of God. The Bible is the book that makes fools of the wise of this world; it is understood only of the plain and simple hearted. Esteem this book as the precious fountain that can never be exhausted. In it thou findest the swaddling-clothes and the manger wither the angels directed the poor, simple shepherds; they seem poor and mean, but dear and precious is the treasure that lies therein.

—Luther

Response to Paul La Montagne's Lecture on "The Inspiration of Scripture in the Theology of Karl Barth."

Jeffrey Finch

I don't know Barth well enough to address the specific question of whether or not he held a 'divine inspiration' view of Scripture, as considered over against a 'human response' view. Instead, I'll proceed under the assumption that Paul's characterization of Barth's thought on this matter is accurate and then direct my comments to the question of the relative adequacy of Barth's position. I will do so, furthermore, from a Roman Catholic perspective, relying primarily on the critique developed by Fr. Louis Bouyer in his 1956 work, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*

(Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press).

Bouyer, who was a younger contemporary of Barth and an adult convert to the Catholic Church from French Lutheranism, begins by addressing the same situation of reductively naturalistic, liberal Protestantism that confronted Barth and asks how "the Reformation, begun to extol the work of grace, arrived at a Pelagianism never equalled before; begun to exalt the sovereignty of God, arrived at an immanentism absolutely closed to all the transcendent. . . ; begun to establish beyond dispute the divine authority of Scripture, ended by reducing it to a purely human document and by denying even the possibility of revelation." (194)

His answer to this question is that what he calls the "positive principles" of the Reformation (a return to the centrality of grace, faith, and Scripture, essentially) were poisoned from the outset by Luther's adoption of Occam's 14th century nominalism (most fully in the doctrines of *solus Deo gloria* and extrinsic justification) in such a way that the reformers unwittingly became radical empiricists. In this philosophical framework, he argues, it was impossible to conceive of a grace that became truly ours while remaining fully the possession of the Giver. "This consequence is inevitable, once we admit that we are identical with our experience. If being is reduced to action, and action to what takes place in us, our experience is closed to anything transcendental, or else, on the assumption that the transcendental could intervene, it could only do so by reducing itself to becoming part of ourselves." (153) It follows from this, he continues, that grace must remain extrinsic to ourselves and that faith must remain wholly and exclusively intrinsic to us. The anti-metaphysics of nominalism does away with the idea that anything required for salvation can be both external to us and at the same time personally possessed: "In such a system, every being is doomed to remain a monad impenetrable by any other. . . . If we apply (Occam's) criticism of any metaphysic at all realist, to suppose a grace that intervenes in us is to suppose that grace is only a word to designate something that is in reality part of us, or of the same nature as we are, and so capable of being made ours purely and simply." (154-55)

From this novel and historically disastrous negation, Bouyer argues, flowed the litany of equally catastrophic and distinctively Protestant *solas*. Setting the Bible in isolation from the visible Church, for instance, removing it from the bosom of the Mother who conceived it, forced Protestants to come up with all sorts of fantastic theories of divine inspiration, in such a way that the human element in the writing of Scripture was practically denied. When biblical scholars of the 18th century began to gain an acute awareness of the human element, then, with the advent of scientific historical scholarship, there was no recourse but to deny the supernatural element altogether, since the (negative) principles of the reformation had ineluctably opposed the action of God to the action of man.

Bouyer furthermore suggests that the historically typical reaction of 'orthodox' Protestants to this inevitable conundrum is to return to the Reformers themselves. But this, of course, serves only to perpetuate the vicious circle and usually produces something worse than it did the first time. "If 'orthodox' Protestants regularly beget 'liberal' Protestants, the 'neo-orthodox,' whom liberals engender in

their turn, only bring forth atheists, who view, no longer with hate, but merely with scorn, any religion claiming to be transcendent.”(175-76)

Karl Barth’s legacy, according to Bouyer, is to have hardened and radicalized precisely what was wrong with the Reformer’s thought: namely, the nominalism that construes the salvation from God as less than real. He did so by failing to criticize the absolute immanentism of Ritschl’s post-Kantian assumption that the noumenon and the phenomenon are so inexorably separated that Christian faith must originate and remain ever within man himself. Instead, Barth simply substituted a noumenalism for Ritschl’s phenomenalism, in such a way that the two spheres remain incommunicably apart. Although he attempted to step away from the excessively juridical tone of Luther’s thought, and in particular from extrinsic justification (by insisting that the Word is creative; what God declares to be so, He *ipso facto* causes to be so), he succeeded only in making the Word of God less accessible to human apprehension---in fact, so reductively transcendent, Bouyer claims, that it cannot be interpreted or comprehended at all. In the course of prosecuting his philosophical campaign against what he thought to be the fundamental error of both pietism and Catholicism, i.e., “the confusion of the work of God with the work of man, the setting of man in the place of God”(195), Barth has unwittingly condemned not only “man’s presumptuous way to God, but God’s way of mercy to man.”(152)

Stepping away from Bouyer, then, but mindful of the above related critique, let me say that my problem with Barth’s scheme is not so much that he denies the divine authorship of Scripture (which he clearly does not), but rather that his epistemology, soteriology, ecclesiology and larger theological framework make such a doctrine at least much less plausible, if not downright impossible to believe.

John Henry Newman once asked, “How are we practically to combine the indubitable fact of a divine superintendence with the indubitable fact of a collection of such various writings?” In other words, how does the inspiration of the authors of Scripture (even if one assents to that much) guarantee the truth of Scripture (at least in its theological and moral aspects) unless its redactors and compilers are equally assured of the grace of divine authority?

Paul sympathetically said of Barth’s thought, tonight: “the question of what criteria we shall use to determine when the Scripture is God’s witness and when it is only a human witness does not arise in this form. There are no criteria whatsoever, no human criteria, by which this can be determined.” But this, it seems to me, in addition to begging the question (how does one determine whether any given criterion is “human” or divine?), also fails to take adequate account of the historical fact that, at the end of the 4th century, the Church did employ criteria to determine which documents circulating at the time were of divine authorship and which were not. And it was a very human, very messy, and very institutional business. A collection of bishops got together at Hippo and at Carthage, under the patronage and authority of the bishop of Rome, and argued over the apostolicity of the candidate documents. And the criteria they used was nothing like the lower textual criticism we know

today, but rather whether or not the texts in question (e.g. James, II Peter, II and III John, Hebrews, Jude, Revelation, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, etc.) comported with what they already knew to be the teaching of the apostles, i.e., the Faith of the Church.

Secondly, I would suggest that the question of the true interpretation of Scripture cannot be abstracted from the question of its divine inspiration. When Paul tried to speak tonight of the reliability of the Scripture’s interpretation, he had difficulty assigning a subject to that responsibility. At one point, he said “Exegetical scholarship is trusted to determine what passages are intended metaphorically and which are simple recording.” What exegetical scholarship? That’s like saying statistics will resolve our political debates. That there are more than 20,000 protestant denominations currently gracing the globe (most of which, perhaps, were born of exegetical disputes) is testimony to the inadequacy of exegetical scholarship for the task.

And if Barth stops with the bald assertion that God is the author of the Bible’s proper interpretation no less than He is the author of its writing, then he doesn’t really advance us very far, in as much as all Christians who believe in the Holy Spirit believe that much. Where is this definitive, trustworthy interpretive work of the Holy Spirit to be located? How do we recognize it?

If it is God’s nature to be self-disclosing, if the Scripture is a vehicle through which God truly desires to reveal Himself and His will to all the faithful (and not just to a privileged class of gnostic *pneumatikoi*), then where can “the least of these” go to discover its (by no means self-evident) meaning? Who will tell us who or what is represented by the woman of Rev. 12, clothed with the sun and having the moon and stars under her feet? Who is to say what Jesus meant when he said “unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you?” Whose authority is it to determine what precisely St. Paul meant when he said “we are justified by faith apart from works of the law?”

These hermeneutical and exegetical questions are no mere tangents to the question of the divine inspiration of Scripture. The two issues are inextricably bound up with each other as complimentary aspects of the single question of the work of divine providence in transmitting the original deposit of faith. Are we to believe both that God is the author of these multifarious texts *and* that He has left it to the spiritual discernment of individuals, without any visibly recognizable, divinely appointed authority to determine and proclaim their collective meaning? The latter proposition, I want to suggest, makes the former proposition unbelievable.

I ask nothing more than to suffer
for the cause of my Lord Jesus Christ
and by this, to be saved.
If I can do this,
then I can stand in confidence and quiet
before the judgment seat of my God and Savior,
when in accordance with his will,
this world passes away.
—Justin Martyr

Old Princeton and the Doctrine of Scripture

Raymond D. Cannata

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On September 14, 1889 Charles Augustus Briggs, Davenport Professor of Hebrew and Cognate Languages at Union Theological Seminary in New York, caused a major stir in the Church and in the academy with the publication of a new book. Simply entitled *Whither*, it was in fact a "Withering" attack on Princeton Seminary and particularly its teaching on the doctrine of Scripture. Briggs was never one to spare anyone's feelings, but he did see the need to explain the seeming severity and brutality¹ of the tone of his critique. In the Preface, he makes clear that the stakes are so high that all means are justified. He believed that the Church might be on the brink of entering into a great Religious Promised Land, where, in Briggs' words "the barriers between the Protestant denominations may be removed and an organic union formed. An Alliance may be made between Protestantism and Romanism and all other branches of Christendom." (p.xi) Briggs felt that there was chiefly one speed bump on the highway leading to Utopia and this was precisely where the road cut through Princeton, NJ. If it had been up to him, he would have had the road built to avoid Princeton, but it was too late for that now. He explains, "the theology of the elder and younger Hodge that has in fact usurped the place of the Westminster theology in the minds of a large proportion of the ministry of the Presbyterian Churches, now stands in the way of progress., and there is no other way of advancing truth except by removing the errors that obstruct our path." Yes, apparently two men, both deceased, were somehow single-handedly delaying the coming of the Millennial Kingdom on Earth through their poisonous influence on their followers. This being the case, they must be refuted, discredited, and destroyed by whatever means are necessary.

Briggs wasn't bluffing. In the next 300 pages he went to such great pains that he embarrassed even his most sympathetic liberal supporters. Dripping with heavy sarcasm and insults, he attempted to lay bare every conceivable potential weakness in the Princeton doctrine of Scripture. For starters, he charged that the Princeton doctrine of full Divine inspiration of Scripture left no room for the human element in its authorship. Further, its claim of the errorlessness of the Bible was being rendered progressively more absurd with each new finding of higher criticism. To evade the plain truth that our text undeniably contains errors, the Princeton divines had invented a novel new theory that inspiration was only guaranteed for the original (forever lost) autographs. This was a cop-out, a calculated dodge, Briggs, charged. It was also ahistorical, and at odds with what the saints over time had always taught. Most of all, such a formulation was utterly foreign to what the Bible teaches about itself. It was doing violence to the very texts it hoped to validate. Princeton had

somehow "narrowed" the Westminster Confession, Briggs contended, and twisted it into a very un-Reformed caricature. He labeled the Princetonians "muddy scholastics," extreme "rationalists," and, ultimately, "failures." Their doctrine of infallibility had risked the whole authority of Scripture on one proved error, and their retreat to the nonexistent "original autographs" renders our English translations of tainted copies utterly unreliable.

James McCosh, Presbyterian divine, world-reknown metaphysician, and President of Princeton College rapidly penned a firm rebuttal to Briggs' book *Whither*, which he entitled, *Whither? O Whither? Tell Me Where*.

The Seminary probably didn't greatly need his help at the time. For one thing, there was no one in the English-speaking world who could surpass the massive learning, lucid pen, and sheer intellectual powers of the Seminary's own B.B. Warfield. And the Church as a whole, particularly the Presbyterian variety, seemed to enjoy a fairly clear consensus on the issue. When all sides had had their say, Briggs was refuted by the 1892 General Assembly, which passed its famous Portland Deliverance, asking all who denied the inerrancy of Scripture to withdraw from the ministry. When Briggs went a step further, in a highly inflammatory 100 minute address in 1893, heresy charges were sustained against him, soon resulting in the departure of himself and Union Seminary from the Presbyterian Church. The 1892 Assembly's pronouncements were reaffirmed each time they were reintroduced, and inerrancy was declared an "essential and necessary" article of faith in 1910, 1917, and 1923.

In a way, Briggs has been vindicated by history, however. Those in the modern Church who wish to challenge the full inspiration of Scripture generally find it necessary to level basically the same charges which Briggs first outlined unsuccessfully 100 years ago. Presbyterian scholars Donald McKim and Jack Rogers have echoed a very similar line of criticism in their recent book-length works on Scripture, dwelling largely on what they find deficient with Old Princeton.² Dr. Migliore contends that the teaching of scriptural infallibility can be attributed directly to a reactionary response to the "rising tide of modernity." He argues that Warfield and Hodge's teachings are a Protestant version of Vatican I-style Papal Infallibility, and became more "defensive" and "strident" over time.³ Winthrop Hudson says that, "Hodge attempted to keep Presbyterianism in a theological straight-jacket."⁴ John Oliver Nelson, not long ago a Trustee of the Seminary, contended that the Old Princeton doctrine of Scripture leads to a "legalistic" and "impersonal" theology.⁵ And some of the most severe critics have been certain evangelicals, who have embraced Princeton's intellectual rigor, its Reformed theology, its warm hearted piety, and its academic achievements, while rejecting out of hand the doctrine of Scripture which undergirded all these. For example, the evangelical George Marsden, while highly appreciative of nearly all other aspects of Old Princeton, contends that their beliefs on Scripture were "in fact built on a foundation of superficial accommodation to the modern scientific revolution."⁶ They were "so committed in principle to a scientifically based culture even while the scientifically based culture of the 20th century was undermining belief in

the very truths of the Bible they held most dear....To them, however, it might not have been obvious how hopeless their position was."⁷

I could go on,⁸ but you've no doubt heard these mantras before. The obvious next question is: Why in the world am I even bothering to do this? Why waste our valuable time on a teaching that everybody would seem to agree is worthless? Frankly, because I think you have been deceived. I unapologetically confess to you that I think that Old Princeton may very well provide some critical clues to help us find our way out of the contemporary epistemological maze.

I have learned two things recently by reading the secondary literature on Old Princeton: One, all the critics agree that understanding Old Princeton on Scripture is utterly essential; and two, very few of these critics seem to have actually read much or any of what Old Princeton actually said. I mean that! Work through contemporary textbooks of history and of theology and practically every one will contain at least a paragraph on Old Princeton's doctrine of Scripture, yet few will contain more than a page. Moreover, these textbooks all seem to quote the exact same sound bites from Warfield and Hodge. Warfield alone penned at least two full bookshelves worth of material, and yet it would appear from what his critics quote that all he had to say on Scripture was contained in a few sentences. One quickly gets the strong sense that the modern historians and theologians are not reading the Old Princetonians, they are reading what *each other* says about the Princetonians.

It is also significant to note that at the same time, a small but elite army of very able and gifted scholars have stepped forward in the last ten years to forcefully argue that the Princeton formulations are about the most thoughtful, faithful, and relevant yet articulated by the Church.⁹

The one thing that both sides claim to agree on is the significance of Old Princeton. So let's take a closer look and try to judge for ourselves: Let's start by listening very carefully to the following statement by a prominent late 19th century biblical critic: {and I should say that I lifted this quote and several of those which will follow from Moise Silva's excellent essay entitled "Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy."}¹⁰

It is not merely in the matter of verbal expression or literary composition that the personal idiosyncrasies of each [biblical] author are freely manifested..., but the very substance of what they write is evidently for the most part the product of their own mental and spiritual activities...[Each author of Scripture] gave evidence of his own special limitations of knowledge and mental power, and of his defects.

Now listen very carefully to another:

[The Scriptures] are written in human languages, whose words, inflections, constructions and idioms bear everywhere indelible traces of error. The record itself

furnishes evidence that the writers were in large measure dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, and that their personal knowledge and judgments were in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong.

Let us go on to examine the order of the world, and see whether all things do not tend to establish the two main tenets of this religion: Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the center towards which all things tend. Whoever knows him knows the reason for everything.

—Blaise Pascal

Who do you think wrote those words? Maybe Charles Briggs? Another 19th century progressive like David Swing? No, these two passages come from the famous 1881 article entitled "Inspiration" by none other than

Princeton's own B.B. Warfield and A.A. Hodge.¹¹

This brings us to our first major point about Old Princeton's doctrine of biblical inspiration: it contains several subtle, important qualifications. The passages above illustrate the first one: the Old Princetonians taught that somehow taking full account of the human qualities of Scripture does not diminish its authority as divinely inspired and free of falsehood.¹²

So what does it mean for the Princetonians to take the human qualities of the text seriously? It means that one needs to distinguish between official teaching and personal opinion. Warfield states:

... Paul shared the ordinary opinions of his day in certain matters laying outside the scope of his teachings, as, for example, with reference to the form of the earth, or its relation to the sun; and it is not inconceivable that the form of his language, when incidentally adverting to such matters, might occasionally play into the hands of such a presumption.¹³

The reader should expect inspired biblical passages to contain expressions which reflect the commonly held historical and scientific conceptions of the culture in which they were written. As Professor Silva reminds us, "Inspiration does not convey omniscience."¹⁴ But while a passage will reflect culturally bound errors, no doubt incidentally believed by its author, the Holy Spirit has prevented it from teaching the falsehood or error, yet without overriding the personal traits of the author. Warfield makes the critical distinction between the "official teaching" of Paul and those "matters lying outside the scope of his teachings." The issue raised is of authorial intent or purpose. This is where careful, faithful exegesis comes in. Not everything found in Scripture is affirmed or taught by its authors (for example, Ps. 14:1, "There is no God.") Each text must be studied for what it is actually teaching.

So, for example, if the biblical author incidentally states that in the midst of a course of events the sun was "rising over the horizon," he most likely believed, falsely, that the earth was flat and that the sun was literally moving across the crystal dome that covered the Earth. His figure of speech reflects that falsehood, yet it is not taught by the text. In reporting this he is expressing the time of day, not the astronomy.

Thus, when we read Paul's mention in I Cor. 10:8 of

the 23,000 Israelites who died because of their immorality, which is in tension with Numbers 25:9 where the figure is reported as 24,000, the doctrine of Inspiration is not challenged. As Calvin says, "It is not unheard of, when there is no intention of making an exact count of individuals, to give an approximate number...Moses gives the upper limits, Paul the lower."¹⁵ Obviously, neither writer ever intended to state the exact number. If they had, the numbers would not have been rounded off.

This not too difficult to see, but this principle can be strained when we confront a truly thorny passage. How about Genesis 1-3. All the Princeton theologians believed in a literal, historic Adam and Eve. One might assume, then, that their belief in the inspiration of Scripture demanded such a belief in itself, but it did not. Their doctrine of full biblical inspiration does not necessarily require that a given narrative be read literally. That decision must be arrived at by exegetical evidence, understandings of genre distinctions, the context, and so forth. Yes, a reasonable exegete would have to agree that the author intended for Gen. 1-3 to be read literally. When one turns to Paul's inspired interpretations of Gen. 1-3 in I Cor. 15 and Romans 5, it seems nearly certain that the sacred authors intended for the readers to take the historical claims of the passage literally. Even though the historicity of Adam may not be the most important point of the text, it does seem to be the clearly taught by the author.

Such an interpretation, however, is independent of any commitment to inerrancy. These are two separate issues. There are other narratives that Princeton and their followers would clearly not read as historical, such as Jesus' parables, for example. One could theoretically argue (though I believe it would be very difficult) that Gen. 1-3 does not intend to teach that its events actually happened historically. This is a matter of exegesis, however.

A commitment to this understanding of biblical inspiration does not necessarily tie one to any particular interpretations at all. So some of the Princetonians, while empathically holding to a literal, historic Adam and Eve, also believed that some elements of Darwin's theories of biological evolution were not in conflict with the biblical Creation accounts, and may actually be described by them.¹⁶

Likewise, on the issue of authorship, the Princetonians usually arrived at fairly traditional postures, but this is not necessary to their doctrine of inspiration. If a book of the Bible clearly claims to be written by Paul, then their view of divine inspiration holds that it must be. But this is a decision of exegesis. So, for example, the Princetonians might hold that David did not write some of the Psalms that bore his name, if it could be shown that such designations were not intended to teach that he did.

Another qualification, or nuance, of the Princeton teaching that must be noted is that the Holy Spirit's unfailing guidance applies only to the creation of the original autographs of the biblical texts. Just as our current interpretation of the Bible is not guaranteed, neither is the honesty or the workmanship of those who, over time, copied its texts. Thus, our current Bible is not, strictly speaking, completely free of error.

Many have viewed this clause as a calculated dodge. When faced with an unavoidable falsehood in Scripture, the

Princetonian can attribute this to copyist error, and appeal to the unrecoverable original text. The Princetonians would answer, sincerely I think, that the miracle of inspiration is obviously not promised to all who would handle the Scriptural text. And the Princeton divines did NOT, in fact, utilize this as a "free pass" from the hard work of answering biblical critics' concerns. Even when confronted with the toughest biblical difficulties, one very rarely finds them appealing to the "lost" autographs. In fact, the Princetonians believed that the modern copies were actually quite good and well attested for. They should know, among the Princeton ranks were William Henry Green, Joseph Addison Alexander, Robert Dick Wilson, Oswald Allis, and others, who were world recognized pioneers of "lower," or "textual," criticism. Their accomplishments made them confident that we were getting ever closer to the original words with each new linguistic and archeological breakthrough, and that the gulf between our text and the autographs was diminishing.¹⁷

Another point sometimes missed by critics is that the Princetonians did not conceive of divine inspiration as a form of dictation, as had some of the Medieval paintings, depicting the Holy Spirit whispering in Moses' ear. The Princeton divines taught that divine inspiration came by a variety of modes, some supernatural and some quite mundane. Sometimes the biblical writers, such as the apostles, simply reported what they remembered under the subtle, but invisible guidance of the Holy Spirit. Other writers, such as the prophets, probably received visions or angelic visits. In either case the result, by God's will, was the same. Again, without doing violence to the styles, cultural contexts, or personalities of the individual authors.

Still another often forgotten, but critically important element of the Princeton conception of Scripture was the central role of the Holy Spirit in confirming its authority in our hearts. Sandeen expresses the misguided sentiment of many of the critics when he charges:

The witness of the Spirit, though not overlooked, cannot be said to play any important role in the Princeton thought. It is with the external not the internal, the objective not the subjective, that they deal.¹⁸

This is a favorite charge of many Barthians and some of the Dutch Reformed critics, who have been alarmed by the supposed rationalistic foundations of the Princeton epistemology. Because the Princetonians, as good, classic Common Sense Realists, held to certain universal features of rationality shared by all humans, regenerate or not, they believed that evidences were a useful and legitimate preparation for the special grace of the gift of faith. These were solid "High" Calvinists, so this did not mean for them that one could "Josh McDowell" anyone to faith, or *prove* that the Bible was the Word of God. But they did believe that evidences could and should be mustered as secondary causes, under God's sovereign supervision, to show that the Bible is trustworthy and thus prepare the way for the gracious miracle of saving faith. Despite misunderstandings of Old Princeton, they were not un-Reformed or bare rationalists in this area. Hodge, Patton, Warfield, Alexander and the others always emphasized that ultimately commitment to biblical authority came only by the special

work of the sovereign Holy Spirit. Proofs can potentially show that the Bible is trustworthy, but these alone can never be sufficient to bring conviction to our souls that it is the Word of God or submission to its authority. Only the testimony of the Holy Spirit can accomplish this.

So we have sketched a very basic outline of what the Princeton doctrine of biblical inspiration taught and didn't teach, but this still leaves us with a whole other line of criticism: that this Princeton enterprise is really a novelty, outside of the mainstream of historic Christianity. These critics tell us that this formula for Scriptural interpretation was the result of a reaction to late 19th century modernist theological and biblical-critical threats. Not until the late 1870's did the Princetonians abstract and exaggerate tendencies of the narrow school of 17th century Reformed "Scholastics" (i.e. Francis Turretin) to come up with a creative, but unwarranted, invention. While these critics acknowledge that the Church has always taught the authority of the Word of God mediated through the biblical text, they hold that inspiration was not self-consciously attributed to every statement of the Bible, such as its natural or historical claims. Likewise, it is contended, the Church has never conceived of the notion of inspiration residing in the original autographs. It is argued that whatever the Church has believed about Scripture was never systematized, or placed in a neat, rationalistic formula like Princeton's. To do so would allegedly have signaled a disregard for the living character of the Word of God.¹⁹

This is a serious charge. To answer it comprehensively, however, would require broadening the scope of this talk from about 120 years to almost 2000 years. Other talks in this series will trace more precisely the historical understandings of biblical inspiration, but we will only have time to touch on this a little tonight. However, I hope to illustrate that views very similar to those of Old Princeton were voiced by some of the greatest Christian Saints, Reformed and otherwise, since the earliest days of the Church.²⁰

Geoffrey Bromiley, best known for being the key English language translator of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, has written an essay entitled "The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture," in which he convincingly demonstrates that all the major elements of the view of biblical inspiration which we have discussed were present in varying combinations in such luminaries as Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Cassian, and others.²¹ Augustine's views are particularly noteworthy: "the evangelists are free from all falsehood, both from that which proceeds from deliberate deceit, and that which is the result of forgetfulness." And, "If any, even the smallest, lie be admitted in the scriptures, the whole authority of Scripture is presently invalidated and destroyed."²²

Likewise, as many Reformation scholars have pointed out, Luther explicitly contends for an errorless Scripture. Who can believe otherwise in the face of Luther's central teachings: "But everyone, indeed knows that at times the Church Fathers have erred as men will; therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they prove their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred."²³ Elsewhere he states that Scripture is "perfect: it is precious and pure: it is truth itself. There is no falsehood in it."²⁴ And again, "Not

only the words but also the expressions used by the Holy Spirit and Scripture are divine."²⁵ Luther contends, "one letter, even a single tittle of Scripture means more to us than heaven and earth. Therefore we cannot permit even the most minute change."²⁶

McKim and Rogers have gone to great pains to argue that Calvin taught that the Bible was only "partially inspired" and written in "imperfect language," citing as examples his commentaries which indicate that certain passages were not written in an "exalted style." A closer examination does not sustain this conclusion, which is based on an unfortunate misunderstanding of the characteristics of inspiration. As Robert Godfrey has illustrated so well in his essay in *Scripture and Truth*, Calvin, like the Princetonians, understood that full divine inspiration did not controvert the humanity and limitations of the biblical authors. As the Word of God Incarnate could be fully human, with all the limitations that this entailed, and yet be totally free of sin and error, so the written Word of God could be fully human and yet free of sin and error.²⁷

Additionally, in his commentary on Acts 7:14, Calvin comments that when the copyists' human errors are found to have corrupted the original text, they are to be corrected. This is completely harmonious with what became the great Old Princeton textual criticism project, in search of arriving ever closer to the original, uncorrupted autographs.

Calvin held to a Bible that in its original form was inspired and errorless, not only in matters pertaining to salvation, but in all areas to which it intended to speak. Calvin contended that this is the sane conclusion from a close reading of the text, but that one will only become convicted of this truth and committed to it by the special gracious work of the Holy Spirit; an emphasis, again, shared with Old Princeton.²⁸

William Ames, philosophical Ramist, covenant theologian, and undoubtedly not a so-called "17th century Reformed Scholastic" (whatever that means), will serve as our representative Puritan on Scripture. In his most famous work, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, he provides his principles for understanding Scripture. Among these we read:

In all those things made known by supernatural inspiration, whether matters of right or fact, God inspired not only the subjects to be written about, but suggested the very words in which they should be set forth. But this was done with a subtle tempering so that every writer might use the manner of speaking which most suited his person and condition.

Again, the essential elements to our discussion are plain. Further, he includes an appeal to inspiration applying to the original autographs only: "Hence no versions are fully authentic except as they express the sources, by which they are also to be weighed."²⁹

We could dwell on figures from church history for this entire evening and still do an inadequate job. But even a cursory glance illustrates that what we call the "Princeton" view of Scripture was, in the least, a viable Christian position long before the first brick of Alexander Hall was laid.

Let's move on, then, to the immediate 19th century context. You'll recall that Sandeen, McKim, and Rogers,

among others, charge that what has become known as the "Princeton position on Scripture," was a reaction to higher critical attacks on Scripture beginning in the 1870's. It allegedly did not crystallize until the 1881 article by A.A. Hodge and Warfield. Prior to that, some of these notions were assumed by the Church, because there existed no challenges to Scripture's truthfulness, but these thoughts were not yet ordered into their supposedly rigid, scholastic system. This notion has been adopted uncritically in many circles despite the overwhelming evidence against it. It is just so handy for those who don't like Princeton's theology, it even allows you to lay the blame for fundamentalism at their door.

Some of the problems with this account are obvious, I think. First of all, the notion that there were no challenges to Scripture's trustworthiness prior to Wellhausen and Robertson Smith is absurd. We all know that from the beginning of the Enlightenment, at least, doubts about the Scripture's accuracy were lodged openly and often. Many an 18th century rationalist enchanted large audiences with charges that the biblical narratives were myths, rather than history. Doubts about the authenticity of the miracle accounts, including the resurrection were common, if unpopular. Before Darwin or Wellhausen, Voltaire was a best-seller. Thomas Paine, who sold one and a half million copies of his following its 1791 publication, boasted in his even more popular *Age of Reason*, "I have gone through the Bible as a man would go through a wood with an ax and felled trees. Here they lie and the priest may replant them, but they will never grow."³⁰ To act as if there were no challenges to biblical trustworthiness prior to the rise of modern German higher criticism is ridiculous.

These critics further contend that the elder Hodge and Archibald Alexander would not have recognized the younger Hodge and Warfield's formulation of Scriptural inspiration. As evidence they repeatedly cite a *single* illustration Charles Hodge once made in reference to difficult passages of Scripture:

The errors in matter of fact which skeptics search out bear no proportion to the whole. No sane man would deny that the Parthenon was built of marble, even if here and there a speck of sandstone should be detected in its structure. Not less unreasonable is it to deny the inspiration of such a book as the Bible, because one sacred writer says that on a given occasion 24,000, and another says 23,000, men were slain. Surely a Christian may be allowed to tread such objections under his feet.

Unfortunately these critics rarely cite Hodge's *very next* lines:

Admitting that the Scriptures do contain, in a few instances, discrepancies which with our present means of knowledge, we are unable satisfactorily to explain, they furnish no rational ground for denying their

infallibility.³¹

A few pages later in the same work Hodge states, "The whole Bible was written under such an influence as preserved its human authors from *all* error, and makes it for the Church the infallible rule of faith and practice."³²

The case is equally as plain and obvious for Archibald Alexander. The Seminary's founder wrote a book entitled *Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration, and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures*, in 1836, in which he defined inspiration as:

SUCH A DIVINE INFLUENCE UPON THE MINDS OF THE SACRED WRITERS AS RENDERED THEM EXEMPT FROM ERROR, BOTH IN REGARD TO THE IDEAS AND WORDS. This is properly called PLENARY inspiration. Nothing can be conceived more satisfactory. Certainly,

infallible certainty, is the utmost that can be desired in any narrative; and if we have this in the sacred Scriptures, there is nothing more to be wished in regard to this matter.³³

In regards to perceived errors in the Bible, he notes that "some slight inaccuracies have crept into the copies of the New Testament through the carelessness of transcribers,"³⁴ again anticipating the thoughts of the 1881 "Inspiration" article.

As numerous historians have demonstrated, this was the general, though not unanimous, consensus of orthodox Christians of that time. There was disputes about the mode of inspiration, but most agreed on its effects: the Bible was free of error.³⁵ Warfield and Hodge clearly did not perceive that their article was in any way revolutionary or novel, nor, if one reads reviews of it, did any of their contemporaries. You will recall that Charles Briggs blamed the older Charles Hodge for the Princeton view of inspiration as much as he did his son A.A. Hodge.

Certainly one could charge that the Church was wrong for its first 1900+ years about Scriptural inspiration, but no one can reasonably argue that the Princeton view is not historic or catholic. The uniqueness of the Princeton view is not found in what it said, but in the clarity and quality with which it articulated itself. It is a model for this view of Inspiration simply because of the influence of its voice and the achievements of its proponents. It has become a target these days largely because of its immense success.

Now we have a sketch of the way Scripture was understood by the Old Princeton divines. The obvious question that follows is: So what? What can be learned from all this, besides the fact that some long-departed scholars have been badly misunderstood? My intention was not to raise up a Pantheon of our Princeton "household gods" -- this should not be about ancestor worship. This was

By the mere act of calling itself *the Christian Party* it implicitly accuses all Christians who do not join it of apostasy and betrayal. It will be exposed, in an aggravated degree, to that temptation which the Devil spares none of us at any time - the temptation of claiming for our favorite opinions that kind of certainty and authority which really belongs only to our Faith.

—C.S. Lewis

not intended to be merely an exercise in antiquarianism or nostalgia. I think that the Princeton experience has some profound words to speak to us today, things which need to be heard even more now than in the time that they were first spoken.

First of all, if nothing else, I believe that the Princetonians can, at least, teach us some things from their basic approach to reasoned theological discourse. As Balmer and Woodbridge point out, there are two tempting approaches, very unhealthy but all too common, which the Princetonians never succumbed to in the midst of difficult debate. The first wrong-headed approach is one of combative dogmatism. In one's enthusiasm to defend the truth as one understands it, one never comes to fully appreciate his or her opponents' positions. Facts become unimportant, while slick rhetoric devices are implemented. An equally foul approach is found on the other extreme. Here one becomes less interested in the truth than in its pursuit. In an attempt to keep all opinions in perfect balance, one becomes disdainful of anyone who claims that one opinion is better or worse than another. *De facto* relativism sets in. Fortunately, the Old Princetonians never fell into either of these traps. Instead, they eagerly engaged in lively, vigorous debate, without resorted to cheap tactics. Their common sense realist approach made this possible. Unlike extreme Barthianism or certain individualistic existentialisms, Old Princeton theology was, and is, able to engage in open dialogue on Scripture because of its commitment in certain universal rational mechanisms present in all debate partners. Further, their understanding of natural theology made them open to gaining truthful insights from even the most faithless degenerate.

So, if one finds none of the elements of the Princeton doctrine of Scripture convincing (God forbid!), in the very least, I think, one can profit from observing the Princeton model for civil discourse. Of course, the Princeton divines believed that they had much more to offer than that, and they may have been right. All orthodox Christians over the centuries have believed that the Word of God written was central to a living faithful relationship to our Lord. Understanding the nature of God's self-disclosure to His people can seem like a greased pig, especially to the modern believer set amidst a swirling galaxy of contradictory theories about the Bible. If we are indeed called to submit ourselves to the authority of this book there are immensely complicated issues which must be resolved in the process. Few, if any, of these difficulties were not engaged in an extremely sophisticated and thoughtful, yet warm-hearted, manner by the Princeton divines. I believe they offer an excellent place to look for clues to escape the modern epistemological maze. If nothing else, one who has engaged the Old Princetonians will find that their focus is continually on the God of grace, whose precious Word will never pass away.

Endnotes

¹Lefferts Loetscher, though clearly sympathetic with Briggs' perspective, acknowledges that in this book Briggs' "tone was so far from objective that many, including some of Briggs' friends, regretted it." *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 48.

²See especially Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (NY:Harper and Row, 1979) and McKim, *What Christians Believe About the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

³Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 44.

⁴Hudson, *Religion in America* (NY:Scribners, 1981), p. 167.

⁵John Oliver Nelson, "Charles Hodge: Nestor of Orthodoxy," in *The Lives of Eighteen from Princeton*, ed. Willard Thorp (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 209.

⁶Marsden, *Collapse of American Evangelical Academia*.

⁷Marsden, *Evangelicals and the Scientific Culture*, 26, 25.

⁸See also modern Princeton's own James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (1977), or Lefferts Loetscher, *Broadening Church* (1964).

⁹Geoffrey Bromiley, D.A. Carson, W. Robert Godfrey, Roger Nicole, Moises Silva, James I. Packer, Wayne Grudem, John Woodbridge, John Gerstner, David Calhoun, R.C. Sproul, James M. Boice, Mark Noll, David Wells, and Andrew Hofferger are among those who have recently advocated a positive reappraisal of Old Princeton's view of scripture (to name just a few).

¹⁰Silva, "Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, Harvie M. Conn, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), pp. 67-80.

¹¹"Inspiration," *Presbyterian Review* 2 (April 1881):225-260.

¹²A quick aside about the qualifications which follow: I hope that we can avoid two approaches to the qualifications: one is to dismiss them as cop-outs, escape clauses that water down the teaching in order to avoid vulnerabilities; the other is to so focus on the qualifications that we neglect the central thesis that is being qualified.

¹³Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), pp.196-97. Originally from an article entitled "The Real Problem of Inspiration," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 4 (1893):177-221.

¹⁴Silva, p.71.

¹⁵John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), pp.208-9.

¹⁶For an account of the evolutionary beliefs of Warfield, A.A. Hodge, James McCosh and others see Bradley Gundlach, *Evolution at Princeton, 1845-1929* (Univ. of Rochester Ph.D. diss., 1995); David Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

¹⁷See further Marion Ann Taylor, *The Old Testament in the Old Princeton School (1812-1929)* (San Francisco: Mellen, 1992).

¹⁸Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, p.118.

¹⁹See Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, p.106.

²⁰Several of the examples that follow can be found in D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), especially Woodbridge and Randall Balmer's essay "The Princetonians and Biblical Authority: An Assessment of the Ernest Sandeen Proposal," pp. 245-279.

²¹Bromiley, "The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth*, pp. 195-220.

²²Augustine, *De Cons. Ev. Lib. II*, c.12. See also A.D.R. Polman, *Word of God According to St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), pp.56, 66; Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (repr. Phillipsburg, NJ:Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990), pp.461-62.

²³*Luther's Works*, J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann, eds., vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-) [hereafter *LW*], p.11. Each of the Luther quotes which follow can be found in W. Robert Godfrey, "Biblical Authority in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Question of Transition," in *Scripture and Truth*, p. 227.

²⁴*LW*, 23, p.236.

²⁵Cited by A. Sevington Wood, *Captive to the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), p.143.

²⁶Cited by Wood, p. 145.

²⁷This is also argued in J.I. Packer's "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God.

²⁸See Godfrey, pp.225-234; Packer, "Calvin's View of Scripture," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. J.W. Montgomery; John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960); Kenneth Kantzer, "Calvin and the Holy Scriptures," in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988).

²⁹Ames, *Marrow*, ed. John Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim, 1968), pp.185-86; 188-89, cited in Woodbridge and Balmer, p.257.

³⁰See Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), p.113.

³¹Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), I:170.

³²*Systematic Theology*, I:180.

³³*Evidences*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1836), p.230; cf. Woodbridge and Balmer, p.265.

³⁴*Evidences*, p. 112.

³⁵See, for example, the American Sunday School Union's *Union Bible Dictionary* (1839), the most popular book of its kind, for its article on "Inspiration," as cited in Woodbridge and Balmer, pp.264.

Reason in the Balance:

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The Problem of Error in Scripture

William A. Dembski

Most of the contemporary debate over the inerrancy of Scripture assumes we all know what error is, and then examines Scripture to determine whether and to what extent Scripture contains error. Taking error as itself an unproblematical notion, inerrantists then go to great lengths to show that (contrary to appearances) Scripture is in fact free from error. Handbooks that try to smooth out Bible difficulties, as they are called, abound. Those passages in the Scripture that are troubling need to be rendered untroubling. Thus we are presented with a tedious pastiche of harmonizations, justifications, and rationalizations. I personally have found handbooks of Bible difficulties largely fruitless, with my most pressing questions left unanswered.

In this talk I want to change the terms of the debate. Instead of throwing the Scriptures into question and holding our notion of error fixed, I want in tonight's talk to throw our understanding of error into question. As we shall see, error is not nearly as clear a notion as we might first have imagined. My purpose, then, in this talk is to investigate our very notion of error. In so doing, I shall show that error is not a property that can blithely be attributed to Scripture. Indeed, I shall argue that attributing error to Scripture is itself highly problematical—indeed, more problematical than holding to an inerrant Scripture.

The primary matter for investigation in this talk, then, is error. Only after we are clear about the nature of error will we consider what it means for Scripture to contain error. I want therefore to begin this investigation by massaging our intuitions about error. Our natural inclination is to think that error is a perfectly straightforward notion. For example, you get your monthly bank statement. It shows that you have less in your account than is recorded in your checkbook. You investigate the matter and find that when you paid your phone bill two weeks ago, and entered the amount into your checkbook, you didn't carry a one when computing your new balance. The error is discovered and rectified! What could be simpler than that?

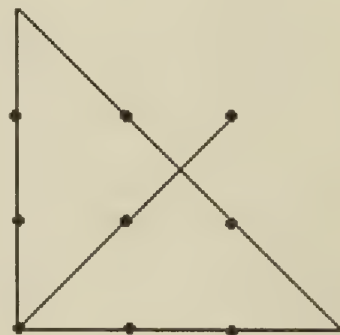
Now I'll grant that errors can be as simple as that. But they need not be. And as we shall see, when it comes to Scripture, they are never as simple as that. In massaging our intuitions about error, let us therefore begin by considering an example where error is not quite so straightforward as in the checkbook example. Consider the following problem. Nine dots are arranged in the form of a square as follows [*draw them on the blackboard*]:



What is the minimum number of line segments needed to join all nine dots if they are joined continuously? Many of you have probably seen this problem, but if you have, try to imagine how you approached this problem when it was first presented to you.

For my part, I was about twelve years old when my dad presented this problem to me. We were on the beach in Italy when my dad arranged the nine dots in the sand, and then challenged me to connect the dots with four continuous line segments. I stared at this problem for fifteen or so minutes, trying many different ways to connect the dots, but found I couldn't connect all of them in less than five line segments. Because I figured my dad had a trick up his sleeve, I wasn't about to tell him to his face that he had committed an error in claiming the dots could be joined with four continuous line segments. But privately I doubted whether it could be done. As far as I was concerned, the minimum number of line segments needed was five. Five was the correct answer, four was an erroneous answer. Finally I gave up trying to solve the problem with only four continuous line segments and asked my dad for the solution.

When he showed it to me, the light immediately went on. I had *assumed* that the line segments joining the dots had to be confined to the square implicitly traced by the dots [*indicate this on the blackboard*]. But of course this assumption was entirely gratuitous. My dad had said nothing about confining the line segments I was joining to this implicit square. Once the assumption of confining the line segments to this implicit square was discarded, and the possibility of drawing line segments outside the implicit square was taken seriously, the solution to the problem became perfectly straightforward. Here it is:



There is an important lesson to be learned from this example, and one that is particularly relevant to the problem of error in Scripture. Ordinarily when this nine-dot problem is presented in textbooks, it is to illuminate human problem solving capacities (cognitive psychology texts, for instance, make much of this problem). To be sure, this problem illuminates our cognitive ability to solve problems. Yet for our purposes, it does much more, pointing up a fundamental difficulty whenever we attribute error. On the beach in Italy my dad challenged me to connect nine dots arranged in a square by means of four continuous line segments. Given my assumption that those line segments were also to be confined to the implicit square traced by those dots, I was perfectly right in attributing error to my dad. Indeed, how could he be so stupid to think those dots could be connected with four line segments—at least five were needed. Given my assumption, I was perfectly correct in attributing error to

my dad.

But my assumption was itself ill-conceived. I myself was in error for holding an assumption that was not required, and that prevented me from solving the problem in the way my dad had set out. There is an irony here: in attributing error I was myself committing an error. I could of course stick pig-headedly to my assumption that the lines had to be confined to the implicit square traced by the dots. But only when I became willing to relinquish this faulty assumption could I understand the solution that my dad had intended. Error is thus a two-edged sword. In attributing it we may be committing it ourselves.

We can schematize what's at stake in the nine-dots as follows. Consider the case of Alice and Bob in which Alice asserts a certain claim and presents it to Bob. Let's call the claim which Alice asserts "thus-and-so." In asserting thus-and-so to Bob, Alice views thus-and-so against a certain set of background assumptions. At the same time, in hearing thus-and-so from Alice, Bob views thus-and-so according to another, perhaps different, set of background assumptions. Briefly put, Alice views thus-and-so from one perspective whereas Bob views it from another perspective. Hence for Bob to charge Alice with error for asserting thus-and-so means that *from Bob's perspective* Alice has committed an error. But does it therefore follow that Alice has in fact committed an error? Alice might be in error, but she need not be. If Alice admits that her perspective is congruent with Bob's and that Bob has correctly demonstrated that thus-and-so is incompatible with her perspective, then Alice is right to admit error.

But this is hardly the only possibility. Bob may himself be wrong in thinking that thus-and-so is incompatible with his perspective. Alternatively, Bob may be right in seeing thus-and-so as incompatible with his perspective (much as I was right to think that at least five continuous line segments would be required to connect the dots assuming, as I did, that the line segments had to be confined to the implicit square traced by the dots), but Bob may be employing a perspective nothing like Alice's and therefore missing the truth of what Alice is claiming (in my case, the truth that only four line segments are needed to connect the dots once we allow line segments outside the implicit square traced by the dots). To summarize, Bob may be right to attribute error to Alice, but alternatively he may himself be in error for attributing error to Alice. How is this dilemma to be resolved? To resolve the dilemma Alice and Bob need to communicate with each other, share their thoughts, learn from one another, check out where their background assumptions agree and disagree—in short, they need to enter each other's perspective.

But this raises an obvious question: How does one enter another's perspective? Despite all the talk these days of knowledge being perspectival and distinct perspectives being incommensurable and truth being relative to perspective, the fact remains that we are capable of moving quite freely among diverse perspectives. The following analogy illustrates this point. Near where my parents have a home in Arizona are two adjacent mountains. Depending on one's perspective, one mountain will look taller than the other. What's more, changing perspectives is simply a matter of changing location. But note that not all

perspectives are created equal. One of the mountains actually is taller than the other. A perspective from which the shorter of the two mountains seems the taller is therefore deceptive. Note also that there are privileged perspectives from which it is possible to tell which mountain actually is the taller of the two. Thus, if I were to get into a helicopter and fly between the two mountains, the perspective of flying between the two mountains would allow me to decide conclusively which of the two mountains is indeed taller.

But of course, in treating the subject of error, we are concerned not with physical perspectives, but with epistemic perspectives. Physical perspectives are physical locations from which we view a scene. Epistemic perspectives are conceptual frameworks from which we examine the world. All the same, the preceding remarks about physical perspectives carry over to epistemic perspectives quite nicely. In practice we move quite freely between distinct epistemic perspectives. To return to the nine-dots problem, when my dad presented me with the problem initially, I was operating from a perspective in which any continuous set of line segments connecting the dots had to be confined to the implicit square traced by the dots. My dad, on the other hand, was operating from a perspective in which the line segments were allowed to protrude outside this implicit square. Once my dad pointed this out, I immediately entered into his perspective. Moreover, it's clear that my dad had also entered into my perspective, for he knew precisely why I was having such a hard time solving this problem, namely, because I was limiting my attention to line segments contained within the implicit square.

Let us now move our examples a bit closer to home. Here at Princeton Theological Seminary we learn to move quite freely among different perspectives from which to view Scripture. Take a course from Professor Diogenes Allen, for instance, and you'll get a fairly classical perspective from which to view Scripture. Take a course from Professor Bruce McCormack and you'll get a Barthian perspective. Take a course from Professor Mark Taylor and you'll get a post-structural perspective. Take a course from Professor Nancy Duff and you'll get a moderate feminist perspective. Take a course from Professor Daniel Migliore and you'll get a mild liberationist perspective. We are confronted here with many distinct perspectives on Scripture. Some of them are helpful for gaining valuable insights into Scripture. Others give us a deceptive view of Scripture.

Before examining the various perspectives available to us here at Princeton Seminary for viewing Scripture (our perspectival options, if you will), I need to stress—indeed overemphasize—that we can and do move quite freely among distinct perspectives. The reason I cannot stress this point strongly enough is because all too frequently in our day we are led to imagine ourselves inescapably imprisoned within our perspectives. Thus we are led to believe that our perspectives are unalterably fixed and that whatever we see is solely a function of the perspective where fate has stuck us. The fact is, however, that much as God has given us mobile bodies with which to change our physical perspective, so too God has given us mobile minds with which to change our epistemic perspective. To change our physical perspective we simply have to move our bodies, an activity to which all normal bodies are ideally suited. So too, to

change our epistemic perspective we have to move our minds, an activity to which all normal minds are ideally suited. Of course we don't typically speak of "moving our minds." We have another word for that, and it is called *inquiry*.

We move our minds, or alternatively change our epistemic perspective, through inquiry. Inquiry has two components. One is the gathering of new information. The other is the sorting of previously gathered information by holding certain pieces of information fixed and throwing others into question. Consider once again the nine-dots example. When my dad initially presented the problem to me, I was operating from the perspective that the continuously joined line segments had to be confined to the implicit square traced by the dots. Operating from this perspective I was unable to solve the problem with only four line segments. But when my dad presented me with the crucial information that the line segments did not have to be confined to the implicit square, I appropriated this information, and at the same time questioned my old assumption about confining the line segments to the implicit square traced by the dots. By doing this, that is, by gathering new information and throwing old information into question, I was able to change my perspective and solve the problem as my dad had initially indicated, namely, with four line segments.

Our minds are ideally suited for inquiry, for changing perspectives and looking at things from different perspectives. Note that inquiry is not to be understood as passive learning, in the sense of passively adding to one's stock of knowledge. Inquiry is not strictly cumulative. As the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it, there is "a time to keep and a time to cast away." The gathering of information is certainly a part of inquiry. But inquiry also has a self-critical aspect. Any information that forms part of one perspective may be thrown into question and rejected when examined from another perspective (and here by information I don't just mean factual claims about the world, but any claims, beliefs, assumptions, or presuppositions whatsoever).

Let me now recap what I have argued for so far in this talk. First, I have argued that we always attribute error in relation of a given perspective. Thus, whether we attribute error to a claim depends crucially on the perspective adopted. Note well that this does not constitute an endorsement of relativism: a perspective does not *determine* what is true or false, but only what one *regards* as true or false. Second, I have argued that perspectives are not all created equal. Some may be much better for generating fruitful and trustworthy insights than others, and still others may be downright deceptive. Thus, for example, the perspective of modern molecular biology is extraordinarily fecund for biological research, whereas Aristotelian teleology has proven scientifically sterile. Third and last, I have argued that we can and do move freely among distinct perspectives by means of inquiry, which I characterized in terms of gathering and critically examining information.

One final observation about error needs to be made before we examine the problem of error in Scripture. As I have characterized error thus far, error is merely the flipside of truth. Thus a given claim is in error just in case it is

false. Error, however, has an additional, personal component that is not shared by falsehood, and which does not allow falsehood to serve as a synonym for error. Whereas statements may be false, it is only people—rational personal agents—who can be in error. To be sure, we speak of a statement as being in error, but only by extension, in the sense that the person making the statement claims to know what in fact is not the case. In his work entitled *Human Knowledge* Bertrand Russell elaborates on this point:

Error is not only the absolute error of believing what is false, but also the quantitative error of believing more or less strongly than is warranted by the degree of credibility properly attaching to the proposition believed in relation to the believer's knowledge. A man who is quite convinced that a certain horse will win the Derby is in error even if the horse does win.

Error always consists in overextending oneself, in claiming more than is warranted from the perspective one has adopted. Error is therefore not the same as lying. The liar is intent on perpetrating a falsehood; the individual who commits an error hopes to hit the truth (but unfortunately fails to hit it). Nor is error ignorance. "Ignorance," as Mortimer Adler and Charles van Doren so aptly put it, "is simply a privation of knowledge unaccompanied by any pretension to know." Error, on the other hand, always entails such pretensions. It is always people who commit errors, and not impersonal detached statements. Moreover, when people commit errors, it is by claiming to know what is not the case, by failing to acknowledge their ignorance, by pretending to knowledge, by presuming competence where they lack it. Although polite society distinguishes excusable from inexcusable errors, depending on whether the individual committing the error is sincere or should have known better, errors are never strictly speaking excusable. Whenever they are discovered, errors are rooted out, unmasked, and rectified. The proper response to error is not rationalization, but eradication.

Error is always a sign of incompetence. It is for this reason that we hesitate attributing error to highly competent individuals when they are speaking in their area of expertise. It is one thing to be told that space is curved by someone just coming off an acid trip. It is another thing to be told that space is curved by Albert Einstein. Our ordinary experience is that lines through space are straight. Ordinary experience seems to confirm that old Euclid got it right. To claim that space is curved is counterintuitive. We are therefore inclined to dismiss as erroneous the claim that space is curved when coming from someone just off an acid trip. A physicist of Einstein's stature making the same claim, however, is a different story. We may scratch our heads, but we probably wouldn't charge him with error.

Let us summarize where we are then as follows. People commit errors when despite intending to assert truth they actually assert falsehood. Committing an error is not the same as lying or ignorance. The person who commits an error has overextended him- or herself, exhibiting a certain measure of incompetence. In committing errors, people always operate from a given perspective. In charging people with error, we must enter their perspective so that we may know precisely what they are claiming. (For instance, with

the nine-dots problem, I assumed my dad wanted me to connect the nine dots with line segments all contained in the implicit square traced by the dots; this assumption was not part of my dad's perspective). Finally, having entered someone else's perspective we must ask, Is the claim being made compatible with that person's perspective? and Does that person's perspective warrant the claims he or she is making? Any charge of error requires an answer to these two questions.

Here ends my discussion of the nature of error. In the remainder of this talk I shall relate this discussion to how we here at Princeton Seminary view Scripture. When it comes to the problem of error in Scripture, we at Princeton Seminary are confronted with three basic perspectives for viewing Scripture. For brevity we shall call these the *divine-inspiration perspective*, the *human-response perspective*, and the *human-constructivist perspective* [write these on the blackboard]. I'm not saying that these perspectives logically exhaust the perspectives from which Scripture can be viewed. Yet in practice these perspectives constitute the three main polarities by which we here at Princeton Seminary orient ourselves. Here is a brief summary of these perspectives.

The **divine-inspiration perspective** is the classic orthodox perspective on Scripture. It assumes that Scripture constitutes the very words of God—the *ipsissima verba Dei*. The divine-inspiration perspective allows that the human writers of Scripture expressed themselves in the full integrity of their humanity, without the slightest diminution of their wills or intellects, but that God, in tandem with their wills and intellects, moved in and through the human writers to express precisely what God intended. The divine-inspiration perspective is encapsulated in 2 Peter 2:21, where the writers of Scripture are described as being moved by the Holy Spirit. According to the divine-inspiration perspective God is fully capable of expressing himself in human language, and of doing so without embarrassing himself. According to this perspective, God is not silent; God speaks Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—and all other human languages for that matter; God has thoughts expressible in these languages; and more particularly for our purposes, God can and does express claims which have at least the theoretical possibility of being in error—that is to say, in the revelatory act God puts his neck on the line.

As for what I'm calling the **human-response perspective**, it is also known as the neo-orthodox perspective on Scripture, and is associated most prominently at this seminary with the name of Karl Barth. According to this perspective the human writers of Scripture do not so much experience the divine revelatory act as communication, as get hit over the head with it, and then try to figure out what happened. God acts, and the human writers record their response (or "witness" as it is usually called) to the divine acts. From the classic orthodox perspective what's acceptable about the human-response perspective is that the human writers of Scripture are responding to a real revelation by a real God. Thus the human-response perspective does not reduce Scripture to a merely human construction, but retains an ineliminable transcendent element in Scripture—the human writer of Scripture is responding not to some internal psychological state, but to

the revelatory activity of a God whose existence does not depend on whether we like it or not.

Nevertheless, as a human response to a divine revelatory act, Scripture no longer constitutes the very words of God. Rather, Scripture constitutes a fallible human witness to what God has wrought in salvation history. Accordingly, Scripture contains errors, factual and otherwise. Within the human-response perspective any errors in Scripture are not regarded as crucial since Scripture, as a human witness to divine revelation, is not the Word of God in itself (the Word of God in itself being Christ), but rather a vehicle by which the Word of God comes to us. And what's important about a vehicle is that it get the job done, not that it be error-free. Thus when we hear Scripture read in chapel, we do not literally hear the Word of God, but rather a witness to the Word of God. For this reason we are told to "listen for the Word of God," inasmuch as what impinges on our eardrums is not the Word of God *per se*, but the vehicle that conveys the Word of God.

Last we come to the **human-constructivist perspective**. If the divine-inspiration perspective sits on the ideological right and the human-response perspective sits in the ideological middle, then the human-constructivist perspective sits on the ideological left. Whereas the divine-inspiration and human-response perspectives assume there is a real God who delivers a real revelation to humanity, the human-constructivist perspective assumes none of this. According to the human-constructivist perspective Scripture is a purely human construction conditioned entirely by sociological, political, cultural, biological, and environmental factors. The human-constructivist perspective is thoroughly reductionist. Human beings have a religious impulse, yes, and they regularly give expression to that impulse. But that impulse and its expression is to be understood not by appealing to a transcendent personal God who acts in people's lives, but as a human idiosyncrasy. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments constitute but one expression of that idiosyncrasy. À la Freud we construct our gods to serve our needs. The fact that we are studying Scripture here at seminary is thus more or less accidental. Religion is important not because it is true, but because people find it important. Similarly, Scripture is important not because it is true, but because a lot of people have made and continue to make a fuss about it.

This concludes my brief summary of the three basic perspectives that confront us here at Princeton Seminary when we view Scripture. With this summary in hand I want next to examine these perspectives critically, specifically with reference to how they handle the problem of error in Scripture. Because I am taking it upon myself to critique these three perspectives, the question of perspectives may be turned back on me. Someone may ask, What, pray tell, is the perspective from which you, Bill Dembski, are operating, and from which you are going to tell us which of these three perspectives on Scripture to adopt? The intent behind this question is, of course, to point up that I am not operating from a privileged, neutral perspective, and thus cannot properly adjudicate among the three perspectives I've just laid out.

Let me respond to this objection. The question what perspective am I operating from is a valid one, but hardly

does the damage it seeks to do. The perspective from which I'm operating is, not surprisingly, my own personal world view, the one I've hammered out upon reflection over the course of my life. In the grand scheme of things this world view may be inadequate or even ill-conceived, but it is *my* world view, and it is one I believe is substantially correct. In critiquing the three perspectives on Scripture that I've just laid out, I'm inviting you to hear me out, listen to my concerns, study my arguments, and thereby enter my world view (if not fully, then at least to some extent). Perhaps you'll be convinced, perhaps not. My aims are modest. I'm seeking to persuade you. I won't charge you with being irrational, wicked, stupid, or insane (as the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins is apt to do) if at the end of the day you don't see things my way.

First then, let us turn to the human-constructivist perspective. From the human-constructivist perspective the problem of error in Scripture simply does not arise. According to this perspective Scripture is a purely human production that admits no transcendent element. Those who adopt this perspective may disagree violently with Scripture, charging it with androcentrism, logocentrism, patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, hierarchy, or what have you—the list goes on. But the charge of error in and of itself will not come up among these charges. To be sure, those who currently hold to the human-constructivist perspective typically see Scripture as riddled with logical inconsistencies, as well as scientific and factual errors. But all such errors are beside the point. The truth of the Scripture is not at issue. Conditioned by their context, the writers of Scripture simply wrote what they wrote. Within the human-constructivist perspective, critical, hermeneutical, and literary methods have but one aim, not to determine the truth in Scripture, but to appropriate the Scripture for the present day so that it may serve the contemporary context by either advancing or challenging its ideals. Yes, I say advancing *or* challenging. Thus we'll find process theology baptizing the secular paganism of our age, whilst liberation theology challenges its capitalist ideals. The point to realize is that whether furthering or challenging the status quo, the Scripture is being used as a pragmatic tool, and not as an authority to which we are required to bow the knee.

The chief problem with the human-constructivist perspective is, of course, that it is non-Christian. In making this claim, I am not being uncharitable, but simply asserting a fact. Just as Naugahyde is not leather and never can be leather, so all the various theologies that take a human-constructivist approach to Scripture are not Christian and never can be Christian. To be sure, we can artificially stipulate the meaning of words, and make the word "Christian" mean something it doesn't mean. But Christianity has always presupposed a realist metaphysics in which a real God does real things in the world—one of those things being to reveal himself in Scripture. But the human-constructivist perspective has no place for this fundamental presupposition of Christianity. The fact that there are process, liberationist, and feminist theologies that appeal to the Bible and appropriate its terminology is simply not enough to make their theologies Christian. Christian theology properly so-called is impossible within a human-constructivist perspective.

Next, let us turn to the human-response perspective. At first blush the problem of error in Scripture does not seem to arise for the human-response perspective either. Indeed, one will find Barth in his headier moments claiming that the more radical and disturbing the results of critical studies of the Bible, the better. Nevertheless, error does remain a problem for the human-response perspective. To see this, it is not enough to consider some minor historical glitch about the life of Jesus. The human-response perspective is ever ready to accommodate small errors, but it is incapable of accommodating massive error. Perhaps it doesn't matter whether Jesus performed this or that miracle attributed to him in the Gospels. But if Jesus never lived at all (as was the official party line in Ceausescu's Romania), then there is no Word of God Incarnate to which the Scriptures, as the Word of God Written, can bear testimony. Thus we may conclude that while small, niggling errors are not a problem for the human-response perspective, massive errors are.

An obvious question now arises: How do we distinguish small errors from massive errors in Scripture? Is there a criterion by which to decide which errors are important and which are trifling? Unfortunately, those who hold to the human-response perspective have yet to furnish such a criterion. Indeed, it is a safe bet that they will never furnish such a criterion. Rather, they will hold that the Holy Spirit, in guiding the community of faith, can be trusted to convey God's revelation through the Scripture, preserving the community from massive error, and rendering minor errors innocuous. This is of course fideism—faith without reason—and it is very comforting for those who can buy into the system. Rational argumentation goes by the board, and you can go on believing what you've always believed, regardless of the challenges that science or historical-critical studies or postmodernity throws your way.

But there is a price to be paid for the comfort of insulating yourself against rational argumentation. And in my view the price is far too high. There is a long list of things I find unacceptable about the human-response perspective: it is parasitic on the divine-inspiration perspective; it hinders us from worshipping God fully with our minds; it revels in the inscrutability of God; it is far too ready to trust historical-critical studies of Scripture and the claims of evolutionary biology; it totalizes proclamation at the expense of persuasion; the list goes on, with each item on the list requiring considerable expansion. Since we shall be discussing Barth's view of Scripture later in the term, I shall leave the discussion here. Unlike the human-constructivist perspective, one can do Christian theology properly so-called within the human-response perspective. As far as I am concerned, however, the human-response perspective gives away the store, if not now, then a generation down the road.

Finally let us turn to the divine-inspiration perspective. Whereas the problem of error did not arise at all for the human-constructivist perspective, and arose for the human-response perspective only when confronting the problem of massive error, the divine-inspiration perspective leaves no room for error whatsoever. In making this claim I am not seeking to be provocative. An omniscient God intent on communicating truthfully by means of human language is simply not going to err. As was argued earlier, errors are

always committed by persons, and always signal a lack of competence. Of course if one believes in an incompetent deity, then one is free to attribute error to Scripture even from a divine-inspiration perspective. But every coherent doctrine of God that I know ascribes a host of perfections to God, and one of those perfections is certainly the competence of God to accomplish his intentions. Thus, when God intends to state the truth about some matter, we can rest assured that God will be successful in stating the truth, and won't state a falsehood. To reiterate, the divine-inspiration perspective combined with any reasonable doctrine of God is going to yield inerrancy for its revelatory texts.

Well now, that certainly seems to settle matters, doesn't it? The human-constructivist perspective is not even Christian, and the human-response perspective is highly problematical. By default it therefore seems to follow that the divine-inspiration perspective must be correct. Yes? Of course things are not quite that simple. The three perspectives do not exhaust the space of logical possibilities. Moreover, the divine-inspiration perspective may be sufficiently problematical in its own right so that the other two perspectives, despite their faults, may not look so bad on second thought. What I propose to do then in the remainder of this talk is show that the divine-inspiration perspective is tenable, that it is capable of withstanding the main criticisms that have been brought against it to date, and that it can hold its own against the other two perspectives.

Because the very idea of an inerrant Scripture is so alien to the contemporary theological scene, let's start by removing some misconceptions. First off, let's be clear that error is not a necessary feature of human language-use. To err is certainly human, but not an essential feature of our humanity. To employ an analogy (and it is only an analogy), Jesus, the incarnate God, was fully human, but did not sin. So too, Scripture, the divine revelatory text, is a fully human production, but without error. We all are capable of making true assertions and of stringing true assertions together. One can even write a computer program that will generate infinitely many true assertions, none of which will be in error (e.g., $0 < 1$, $0 < 2$, $0 < 3$, ...). The wide prevalence of error in human practice is an accidental, not an essential feature of human practice. There is therefore nothing inherently absurd about an inerrant Scripture.

Nor is it absurd to think that God might actually be capable of communicating with humanity in language understandable to humanity. Calvin saw God's revelation in Scripture as an accommodation of the divine majesty to our human frailty. Certainly God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and there are many thoughts God has which are not expressible in human language. But God also has thoughts which are accessible to us and which he means to communicate with us, not the least of which is that we are to love him and our neighbor. To deny that God can speak to us in human language is an entirely gratuitous requirement imposed on theology since the Enlightenment. God's "wholly otherness" is not destroyed by God communicating with us in human language. Just as a shepherd is not "sheepified" by tending sheep, so God is not

anthropomorphized by speaking to us in human language. God is not wholly other because he is inscrutable and can't properly express himself in human language. God is wholly other precisely because as God of the whole universe he condescends to communicate with creatures made of clay. Potentates, tyrants, and sages may revel in inaccessibility and inscrutability. But this is not how God is revealed in Christ. The God in Christ is Abba, Father. I know of no father who does not speak the language of his children.

But if God is capable of speaking in human language and has actually spoken in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, why is the Scripture riddled with so many inconsistencies, repetitions, scientific bloopers, moral monstrosities, and historical glitches? In short, why are there so many errors? Before calling in the results of our earlier examination of error to answer this question, it is best to address an evasion that all too frequently comes up at this point and muddies the waters. Within evangelical circles it is common to distinguish an inerrancy view of Scripture from an infallibility view, with inerrancy being the stronger view. As far as etymology is concerned, the meaning of inerrancy and infallibility should of course be the same. Inerrancy derives from the Latin noun *error*, meaning error or mistake, whereas infallibility derives from the Latin verb *fallo*, meaning to deceive or lead astray. Given these root meanings, it's clear that infallibility and inerrancy should mean substantially the same thing. That they don't derives from some fancy footwork.

Within evangelical circles the idea that Scripture does not err in matters of faith and practice, but can err in other matters has gained wide currency. It is this view that goes by the name of infallibility. Though perhaps initially appealing, infallibility so-defined constitutes an incoherent view of Scripture. The problem is that within Scripture, matters of faith and practice are inextricably tied together with matters of history and science. Presumably the Ten Commandments are the very words of God, but the divine command to exterminate all the Amalekites was not. Infallibilists have no clear criterion for distinguishing the things that Scripture gets right from the things it gets wrong. Thus in practice the infallibilist ends up conflating the divine-inspiration perspective and the human-response perspective, appealing to one or the other as convenience dictates. But these perspectives are fundamentally incompatible. If God is verbally communicating through Scripture, then attributing error to Scripture is incoherent. Alternatively, if Scripture is merely the record of human responses to divine actions, then errors can be imputed just as readily at the level of faith and practice as at the level of science and history.

Well then, what are we to make of all the errors in Scripture? By now it's clear that the worst thing one can do in responding to this question is itemize all the problematic passages in Scripture, and then point by point try to argue that these passages are free from error. This strategy cannot succeed. That the Scripture contains problematic passages has been recognized by the Church from its inception. Even Scripture itself acknowledges as much, for we read in 2 Peter 2:16 that the apostle Paul wrote "things hard to be understood." Orthodox theologians throughout church history have recognized that Scripture contains problematic

passages which remain thoroughly unresolved. Thus when confronted with the charge of error against Scripture, we have a three-fold choice: we can admit error, we can resolve the supposed error, or we can admit perplexity. Often a supposed error in Scripture can be resolved, with the charge of error then being decisively refuted (recall, for instance, the charge by Biblical scholars last century that the Hittites had ever existed). But if a problematic passage does not yield to our attempts to resolve it, what shall we do then? Our choice then becomes two-fold: we can either admit error, or admit perplexity.

But doesn't admitting perplexity become a cop-out after a while? Isn't it more honest just to admit that Scripture represents the bumbling efforts of a bunch of middle-eastern rubes? But this line of attack is easily turned around: Isn't charging the Scripture with error simply a sign of our own self-assertion, elevating our own 20th century secular

perspectives against the perspective from which God views the world. Yes, God is a rational personal agent who operates from a perspective of his own, what philosophers refer to as a God's eye point of view. Since academic philosophers these days largely dismiss God, they tend also to dismiss the notion of a God's eye point of view. But as good Christian theists we ought not to have a problem with a God's eye point of view. God, as the author of Scripture, operates from an infinite perspective that incorporates all our finite perspectives. Our hermeneutic task then is, as far as is possible with the aid of the Holy Spirit, to enter the divine perspective, and thereby understand what God is teaching his Church by Scripture. If we take this approach, we won't find any error in Scripture. But if we don't, we can't help but find error in Scripture. The choice then is up to you, which perspective you are going to trust, yours or God's.

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Incarnation Models, Part 2: Two-Minds and Kenosis

Jay Wesley Richards

As we have seen, a strategy is possible to defend the traditional doctrine of the incarnation against the charge of incoherence (see *Is the Doctrine of the Incarnation Coherent?* in the October 1995 issue of the PTR). If a model can be found which is merely *possible*, the incoherence claim fails. As noted earlier, the believer who is committed to the truth of the incarnation will allow that belief to "adjust" her definitions of divinity and humanity. This does not mean that *a priori* intuitions (including the *via negativa* and *via eminentiae*) are all rejected; rather, they are liable to "correction" in light of the incarnation, if such correction is deemed necessary to accommodate the reality of the incarnation. Some properties initially thought to be kind-essential to humanity or divinity may have to be ruled *accidental* or common, but not *essential* properties. At the least, such essential properties may have to be carefully qualified, particularly in the kenotic model. Although numerous formulations are possible, we will look at two fairly plausible ones: the two-minds view, proposed by Thomas Morris, and the careful kenotic view of Ronald Feenstra. Both affirm the Chalcedonian conviction of Jesus as "truly human" and "truly God," and both are coherent. They do not disagree over the reality of the incarnation, which is not itself a model,¹ but rather the specific ontological manner of incarnation. Both proposals take seriously the relevant biblical witness, seeking to maintain integrity to the bases of Christian authority while explicating the doctrine in an intelligible fashion.

Morris wishes to maintain Anselmian intuitions of the divine attributes, in which "God is thought of as exemplifying necessarily a maximally perfect set of compossible great-making properties."² Such a commitment may initially appear to make his task more difficult; but if successful, he could not be accused of diminishing fairly agreed upon divine attributes in order to "rescue" incarnational doctrine from its detractors. Given Anselmian commitments, Morris grants *prima facie* validity to a number of divine attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence, which are thought to be *necessary* attributes of God. Therefore, God could not maintain his divinity if he failed to exemplify such attributes. This strategy seems a good one, for as he argues: "If such an exalted conception of divinity can be squared with the doctrine of the Incarnation, then presumably more modest conceptions can be as well."³

Undoubtedly, the "more modest conceptions" he has in mind are the kenotic theories.

Granting the Anselmian properties, which Morris takes as comprising a divine kind-essence,⁴ he makes a few important distinctions. The first is between *kind-essence*, "that cluster of properties without which . . . an individual would not belong to the particular natural kind it distinctively exemplifies," and an *individual-essence*, "a cluster of properties essential for an individual's being the particular entity it is . . . without which it would not exist."⁵ By definition, an individual can possess only one individual essence, but there is no logical necessity barring the possibility that some individual, say Jesus, possesses more than one kind-essence.

The second distinction is between common or *universal* properties, and *essential* properties. Universal properties do not imply necessity. All humans may have been born on earth. But a future person who is born aboard a space station would not be excluded from the human race, because birth-on-earth is not a property essential for being human. Similarly, properties like finitude, nescience, and non-omnipresence may be universal for human beings without being necessary.⁶

This leads to the third distinction between being *fully* human, and being *merely* human. We are all fully human, in that we possess whatever kind-essential properties are required to make us human. But we are merely human as well: we have only the kind-essence of humanity. So Jesus may be fully human, without being merely human.⁷

With these distinctions, Morris is logically free to predicate certain "divine" properties of Jesus, who possesses two kind-essences. Still, he is committed to squaring his theory with the biblical portrayal of Jesus, a person who lacked omniscience, became physically tired, and generally exhibited the limiting capacity of a human body and mind. How can one predicate omniscience and omnipotence to such an individual? Morris seeks to do this by proposing the *two-minds* view, whereby the incarnation

involved not just a duality of abstract natures, but a duality of consciousness or mentality which was thus introduced into the divine life of God the Son. The two minds of Christ should be thought of as standing in something like an asymmetric accessing relation: the human mind was contained by but did not itself contain the divine mind, or, to portray it from the other side, the divine mind contained, but was not contained by, the human mind.⁸

Although the divine mind of the Son had perfect access to the human mind of Jesus, his human mind had the restraints of a "normal" human mind. Jesus as a mere human individual does not exist, but only as ontologically unified with the divine person and mind of God the Son. So this

¹Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 9.

²Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 76.

³Thomas V. Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed., R.

Feenstra and C. Plantinga (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 114.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, 115.

⁶*Ibid.*, 116.

⁷*Ibid.*, 117.

⁸*Ibid.*, 121-22.

union is *not* analogous to the access God has to other human minds, who are separate individuals. Nor does it amount to saying that in Jesus Christ we have two persons (which would surely be heresy).

While this proposal may at first appear difficult to imagine, it has much in common with some contemporary psychology, neurology, and philosophy of mind. As an analogy, one might imagine the dual aspect of a dream in which one is participating in the dream, while simultaneously being aware that one is dreaming.⁹ Many theorists imagine the human mind, not as a system, but as a "system of systems of mentality."¹⁰ These examples may be somewhat esoteric, but anyone can imagine the existence of opposed wills within one's own mind. So while we may have only partial analogies to the two-minds view, I judge it both intelligible and coherent.

A second possible model appropriates the notion of *kenosis*, whereby God the Son "emptied" himself of whatever attributes (or aspects of attributes) which would conflict with him being "fully human" in the person Jesus. Some earlier formulations of kenotic christology seem to me clearly guilty of abandoning the divine attributes as essential, in conflict with the majority of traditional Christian theology. As such, they are vulnerable to the charge made by *The Myth* authors that they resolve the tension by giving up one half of the dilemma. So even a modern kenotic partisan is willing to conclude: "[T]he fact that I believe both that Jesus Christ was God and that Jesus Christ was non-omniscient leads me to deny that omniscience is essential to God."¹¹ Since, by definition, an essential property cannot be removed from an individual without altering the identity of that individual, one can only ascribe divinity to the non-omniscient Jesus by denying the attribute of omniscience as kind-essential to divinity. While such a strategy is capable of resolving logical difficulties, I think it does too much violence to both the tradition and Anselmian intuitions.

However, Feenstra's model does not seek to *deny* divine properties such as omniscience as essential to God, but to *define* them carefully. So, to make room for incarnation--or, in light of the incarnation--we may say that omniscience in just any sense is not an essential property for God to be God, but rather "omniscience-unless-freely-and-temporarily-choosing-to-be-otherwise."¹² If this is what we mean by

divine omniscience, then it could consistently be predicated of God in general, and of Jesus in particular. Other attributes such as omnipotence and omnipresence, if understood broadly as potential *access* to ultimate power, could be ascribed to Jesus, because he may have possessed such power (as for example, in the gospel temptation narratives), but freely chosen to give it up temporarily. God the Son, in pre-existence and exaltation, would enjoy these full exercise of these attributes, but would temporarily suspend them while incarnate on earth for the purpose of redemption--a capacity built in to the definitions of the divine attributes.

While Feenstra makes some other distinctions to avoid the accusation that the kenotic Jesus loses his humanity once exalted, this cursory description should suffice to make

Without the *Scripture*, which has only Jesus Christ as its object, we know nothing, and see only darkness and confusion in the nature of God and in nature herself.

—Blaise Pascal

the two models clear. As I see it, the two proposals could be generally distinguished by what they "alter" in light of the truth of the incarnation. Both agree that the incarnation is a controlling factor, and that *a priori* definitions of either divinity or humanity should not be allowed to defeat the Christian affirmation of God the Son's actual incarnation in the man Jesus. For the two-minds view, priority is given to the Anselmian attributes of divinity, and so Morris alters the kind-essential properties of "humanness" to resolve the dilemma. Feenstra, on the other hand, qualifies these divine attributes to make room for the biblical witness to Jesus' "limitedness." So the locus of qualification for the two-minds view seems to be "humanity," and for the kenotic view, "divinity." Both seek to be faithful to Scripture and Chalcedon, but the kenotic view gives less authority to Anselmian intuitions. Both appear to be coherent. If all this is true, how shall we decide which one is preferable?

Although Morris' loyalty to an Anselmian view of God as a maximally perfect being is obvious, I do not think Feenstra would reject the definition of God as a maximally perfect being. What we seem to have is a disagreement about *which* properties are the most perfect. Simply put, we have a clash of intuitions.¹³ Feenstra would surely object to the accusation that he presents divine attributes which are less than superlative. He could simply argue that a definition of, for example, omniscience which includes the ability to suspend such a capacity is greater than a definition which lacks that capacity. Morris could counter that the ability to suspend omniscience is no more an improvement of necessary omniscience than is the ability to sin an improvement of necessary goodness. It is rather a diminution of the divine property of omniscience. And around we could go with every other attribute, agreeing that

Feenstra and C. Plantinga (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 140.

¹³Thomas V. Morris, ed., *The Concept of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7.

⁹Ibid., 122.

¹⁰Ibid., 123.

¹¹Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1983), 124.

¹²Ronald Feenstra, "Reconsidering Kenotic Christology," *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed., R.

God possesses a perfect cluster of attributes, but disagreeing on what those attributes are.

If the disagreement does in fact exist at the level of intuition, then neither exegetical arguments nor logical arguments will settle the matter (except, perhaps for Philippians 2, which the kenoticist has as a small hook for his theory). I think one criticism can be given against the kenotic model that is not true of the two-minds view: It seems to depart from the majority of intuitions of the theologians in the historical Church. In fact, the passages quoted by Morris from Pope Leo and Athanasius seem to run directly counter to the kenotic strategy.¹⁴ The two-minds model, on the other hand, seems to be directly in line with the commitments of Leo and Athanasius. So while lesser criticisms about general neatness, satisfaction, and plausibility could be raised against the two models, Morris' commitment to the historical Anselmian divine attributes gives the two-minds view a very slight edge over the kenotic one in my opinion. I still think that the kenotic view gives up too much in order to formulate a coherent picture of the incarnation. But I must admit that my conclusion rests on no point of exegesis or logic, but rather on intuition.

However, there is a more basic point which we may have forgotten. If one must appeal to intuition to criticize one or the other of these two models, then they *both* appear to be successful in what we might suspect is their primary goal: to articulate a coherent model of the incarnation which is faithful to both Scripture and Chalcedon. To succeed, they need not even assert that their proposal is true, but only that it is possible, and thus, coherent. Insofar as the two-minds view and kenotic model we have considered are able to do this, the charge of incoherence in tracts like *The Myth of God Incarnate* misses the mark, and falls to the ground. Without this formidable accusation, theologians committed to the tradition are free to reflect on and to affirm, without undue worry, the truth of God incarnate.

"It seems, then," said Tirian, smiling himself, "that the Stable seen from within and the Stable seen from without are two different places." "Yes," said the Lord Digory. "Its inside is bigger than its outside." "Yes," said Queen Lucy. "In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."

—C.S. Lewis

Postmodernism at a Glance

Chad Clifford Pecknold

Many people are being excluded from an important discussion known today as *postmodernism*. The struggle to define postmodernism has been a 'slippery fish,' precisely because it is in the *process* of being defined. The amount being written on the subject has become mind numbing and awesome, making it inaccessible to some. I cannot claim to be a postmodern expert, but I have written this essay in the hopes of opening up the discussion to all those whose time is limited but whose curiosity is great.

If we are to discover postmodernism in its proper context, we will need to take a survey of intellectual history in broad strokes. Beginning with the traditional worldview, we will take a glimpse at the Enlightenment and the modern age as part of the answer to our question: what is postmodernism?

Postmodernism, one quickly sees, is a referential term. It is not one thing that can be defined, as it might seem with my treatment of this survey, but it is referentially a response to something: namely modernism. Why react to modernism? It has provided us with electricity, automobiles, computers, life-saving medicine, and has even put a man on the moon. The benefits of the modern age are easy to see, as are the destructive aspects clearly visible in the rise of nuclear weapons. But these are only some of the most visible effects of modernity. Behind these effects are ideas. Postmodernism is an epistemological response to some of these particular ideas. Might we ask what these ideas are that deserve such a response? Might we ask who is doing the responding?

The *intelligentsia* of many academic communities have given significant shape to the way the world thinks, and thus they receive much attention in any study of shifting epistemologies, as we shall see. I will pay special attention to the relationship between the Church and science because in them we find the assumed tension between knowledge gained by *revelation* and the knowledge gained solely by *reason*. In each time period I will highlight the changing emphases on these two epistemological centers.

The term epistemology simply means a *way of knowing*. When we discuss "the way the world thinks," we are generally referring to Western civilization's cultural epistemology. We must reach far back into this history to properly understand postmodernism as a reaction to modernity. The influence of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) is generally considered the catalyst for Western thought for his rational, deductive, objective and reasonable thought. However, what will be most helpful to this study is what comes long after Greek philosophy.

The season of history that most concerns us begins with what is called the pre-modern or traditional age. The marriage of Church and State in the Constantinian era, the rise of Papal authority, and monasticism are all grouped into this traditional worldview that is most often associated with being ptolemaic. Ptolemy was a second century astronomer who theorized that the earth was the center of the

¹⁴Morris, *The Metaphysics*, 120.

universe, around which the heavens rotated. This Ptolemaic system was the dominant view of Western cosmology from the second and third centuries, into the fifteenth century.

At the center of this traditional epistemology stands the authority of the Church, whose power was centralized and absolute. The ptolemaic system, by way of analogy, helps to illustrate that the Church was the center of the world, around which all of life rotated. Culture was communally focused. The tradition and authority of the Church were the key integrating ideas of the traditional period, and while *reason* was important, *revelation* was the reference point.

In the minds of many, this season of history was deemed the *dark ages*. *Dark ages*, like postmodernism, was a term coined by those who were part of a new and changing epistemology. The development of a market economy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries began to lead people away from a communal focus and towards an individual one. In such a development, some suppose the seeds of autonomy and individualism. The so-called dark ages faced upheaval in the late fifteenth century in what is often called *the Copernican revolution*. Copernicus (1473-1543) was an astronomer who posited a theory that the planets revolved around the sun. This heliocentric cosmology (sun-centered cosmos) has often been retold by historians as a point of division between science and Christianity. However, the modern understanding of "science" was unknown to fifteenth century thinkers. The Church felt no such division and in fact supported many of these theories in official documents.

Soon after Copernicus, an astronomer in Italy by the name of Galileo (1564-1642) proved with a telescope that the Copernican theory was correct. In 1633 he was put on trial by the Church. Galileo's observation of sunspots, and even pock marks on the moon, suggested imperfection in the heavens. But contrary to popular belief, he was not put on trial because the Christian faith was incompatible with such a worldview, but because he was accused of disregarding certain prohibitions issued to him by Pope Urban VIII. *Reason* and *revelation* were only supposed to be in conflict with the revision of history that took place two hundred years later.

Galileo's work was supported by other "scientists," including a German named Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and an Englishman named Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Historians agree that this group of men changed the way the world thinks, they helped give birth to a new epistemology which stressed that truth could be discovered through empirical observation. Reasoning became quantitative and geometric. This is often considered the birth of Enlightenment thinking.

The French mathematician Renee Descartes (1596-1650) epitomized the age of the "New Science" in his famous dictum "I think therefore I am," making a question as elemental as human existence, objective and rational. The Cartesian project was an attempt to rethink and question all previous assumptions; it was to begin anew with a slate cleaned from all prejudice and assumption. It began a quest for certainty and a journey of doubt that helped form much of Enlightenment thinking.

The great idea of the Enlightenment was that all could be determined by *reason*. The acquisition of knowledge became comprehensive and consuming to the extent that

knowledge was considered the sum of all things and could be conveyed in alphabetical order and with precision, like great books on a library shelf. People like Francis Bacon, Kepler and Descartes considered their scientific work to be part and parcel of their religious vocation. They were simply divorcing the true faith from an inferior cosmology that no longer was tenable. We can sense the separation today. Science must operate on the principle of mistrust and systematic doubt while faith must operate on the principle of radical trust and systematic hope.

An English empirical philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704) marks another major shift in epistemology. In the search for universals, ultimate truths that governed the natural world, Lockean empiricism rejected *revelation* because it went outside the workings of an ordered, natural world. Locke is often considered the first to make this separation between *reason* and *revelation*.

In the light of vast achievement in the seventeenth century "scientific revolution," Deism came to prominence. Deism is the idea that God made the world to function according to rational laws. God did not need to be there at every moment to see that his machine functioned properly. By studying God's handiwork - the earth, solar system, and humanity itself - people could come to understand the world, and could repair and even improve it. This mechanistic view of God only deepened with the thinking of the eighteenth century, as we shall see.

Lockean empiricism was concerned with how God revealed Godself in the natural order of the world. The result was natural religion. Christianity was not a natural religion but the two were becoming blended and blurred in the minds of many. Lockean empiricism is often considered a seminal event in the establishment of modernity. The age was enormously impressed with Sir Isaac Newton's (1642-1727) famous discovery of the laws of gravity and motion. It sparked a systematic search for the universals of the natural world hoping to unlock God's own laws, promising unending progress!

The 'New Science' was so good at explaining the order of the cosmos, thinkers such as Newton were concerned that God no longer had a place. This concern led to the notion of the 'God of the gaps.' This meant that wherever there was a 'gap' in a scientific theory, they could simply insert God as the variable. This was an earnest attempt to reconcile science and theology. However it was insufficient; as science progressed and learned how to fill the gaps, God became less and less necessary. It made God a member of the universe rather than the sustainer of it.

One of the most famous men to have dealt with natural religion specifically was the Scottish born philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* he wrote that only "the rational and philosophical" kind of religion can stand up to serious scrutiny. Hume continued the strain of doubt found in Descartes to an extreme, and may have indeed been the greatest negative thinker in history. His skepticism of religion on the grounds of reason, objectivity and rationalism had an immediate response in the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

In an essay entitled, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Kant proclaimed his renowned dictum:

"*Sapere Aude!* Dare to Know!" Every time we tell someone to "think for yourself!" we proclaim the motto of the Enlightenment. That epistemology of autonomous reason exposes the full ethic of modernity. Kant wanted to put limits on what we can know in the fields of both science and religion. Kant typified Enlightenment thinking by claiming that the most reliable guide to truth was reason alone. Many consider the Enlightenment's end in the person of Immanuel Kant, however others debate whether Enlightenment thinking does not persist further.

Eighteenth century *philosophes* like Voltaire and Rousseau (and their less radical but far more practical American counterparts, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin) considered Christianity the oppressor of humanity and sought to free people by trying to reveal the faith as mere superstition; the great liberator for such thinkers was rationalism. Reason alone could offer freedom to an enslaved society. Truth was *self-evident* by reason; there was no need for revelation.

It is astounding to look at four particular men who lived within the same approximate lifetime, following Hume and Kant. Each saw the great theme of the Enlightenment as the struggle against religion and the acquisition of pure rational knowledge. Germany produced two such men; the philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel; and the poet, Johannes Wolfgang Goethe. In London was the German born Karl Marx and the great naturalist Charles Darwin. These men represent the philosophy, literature, politics and the science of modernity respectively. They represent the foundations of the modern university.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* offered a critique of the Enlightenment; he believed that its inadequacy was in its claim on absolute knowledge. Hegel said we simply can't know everything. He declared knowledge to be a dialectical process: his famous triumvirate of *thesis*, *antithesis* and *synthesis* was to progressively move us towards (but never into) the *Absolute*. One begins with a *thesis*, finds its opposite in the *antithesis* and arrives at the superior way in the *synthesis* thus leading to inevitable progress.

The fundamental element to glean from Hegel and the nineteenth century modernists is that the acquisition of knowledge promised human progress in understanding. The hope for such progress was that it could ultimately lead to a fuller knowledge of the *Absolute*, resulting in freedom. History then, from this perspective, is thus seen as evolutionary (Darwin) and we can see that *modernity was driven by the ethic of inevitable progress*. The industrial revolution was witness to this firm belief.

A major shift is apparent at the end of the nineteenth century and at the outset of the twentieth century. The German philosopher F.W. Nietzsche (1844-1900) initiated a new season that perhaps gives us great insight into an understanding of postmodernism. Some have gone so far as to say that Nietzsche is the progenitor of postmodernism. With much influence from Darwin and Karl Marx, Nietzsche turned in a different direction, leading the "God is dead" movement. By this he meant that traditional Christian values had lost validity in modern culture. He claimed that new values must be created to replace traditional ones, not unlike what is currently being done in postmodern America today. The ideal person of Nietzsche's movement would

concentrate on the real world, rather than on the rewards of the next world promised by religion. Such an ideal person would be liberated from all values, except those he or she considered necessary. Nietzsche denied that there is any single truth, meaning of history or "moral right."

Nietzsche found much support in people such as Jean-Paul Sartres (1905-1980) who conceived that humans were beings who created their own reality by rebelling against authority, and by accepting personal responsibility for their actions unaided by traditional morality - Christian or otherwise. He believed that human existence was characterized by nothingness, thus the title of his best known work, *Being and Nothingness*.

During this period of history Newtonian physics gave way to Quantum physics and science began to be doubted as providing inevitable progress as well. Indeed, the advent of nuclear destruction shattered any hopes of such a guarantee. What may offer a cautiously definitive voice to postmodernism itself is found in the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930-). Derrida's work focuses on language and has given birth to the school of deconstruction. He attempts to show that language is constantly shifting, and he challenges all traditional assumptions as false.

The central point of Derrida is that a text holds a multitude of legitimate interpretations, there is no single correct interpretation. He deconstructs texts in such a way as to make traditionally absurd interpretations seem viable. He ultimately denies that there is no objective reality. Reason and revelation are no longer the frame of reference, there is no longer a center.

In review, the Enlightenment gave rise to what we now call modernity. The Cartesian project believed in objectivity and rationality. Such a quest for certainty was transformed in the eighteenth century by John Locke. His search for ultimate truths that governed the natural world, became a natural religion that denied revelation and the supernatural but embraced reason as the ultimate good. The United States was born in this strand of the Enlightenment. America synthesized a sort of Deism with Christianity, but it created a two dimensionally flat culture. Nietzsche and Sartres marked a progression of thought that rejected traditional Christianity and subverted traditional assumptions to the hope of creating a whole new morality. Derrida's deconstructionist school subjugated any certainty of meaning gained by the social sciences to the order of false assumption.

Postmodernism can only begin to be understood with this full and rich backdrop. The word 'postmodern' was actually first coined in the field of architecture. The polished, machine-like style of modern construction was beginning to fall out of fashion in the 1950s and 1960s; the movement away from this was called "postmodern." It didn't take long before art and literary critics were using the same term for all reactions against the mechanistic and mathematical tendency of modernism. Then in the 1970s the term began to appear in the discipline of philosophy as people like Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault were advocating with Derrida, for the deconstruction or the dismantling of prior *ways of knowing*.

A prominent advocate of philosophical postmodernism says that the essence of postmodernism is a carefree

skepticism about every possible attempt to make sense of history. The emphasis is on 'carefree skepticism,' which is recognized in theology as a hermeneutic of suspicion. The danger of such skepticism resides in the desire to escape one set of commitments into a re-creation of another set. In this sense, postmodernism isn't so much of a break with modernity but a re-creation of it in its desire to wipe the slate clean and begin anew.

We have kept the Cartesian project's hermeneutic of suspicion, but we have lost our belief in objectivity and rationality. The most alarming claim is that truth is not objective. Reality, meaning and truth are all socially constructed. Truth does not exist objectively. Postmodernism posits that humans are shaped solely by their environment and that the common language (i.e. how culture is transmitted - Derrida) keeps individuals limited in what they can know because it is continually changing.

Another interesting characteristic of postmodernism is that people are deriving their sense of identity and meaning in the context of a group, in response to the radical individualism of modernity. The shift to communalism is not however like that of the premodern or traditional era. There is no longer one community, but a plethora of communities each seeking recognition and rights. The unique concern of postmodernism is the rejection of *both* reason and revelation. The rejection of each also means that authority is nearly impossible to locate. Each season of history has carried different emphases but postmodernism is the first to view both with a 'carefree skepticism.' This leaves significant problems to consider.

What is most problematic about postmodernity is that any claims of truth are considered fictions of a sort. If there is no longer an objective truth to pursue, education easily slips into indoctrination. And if this is true, that we no longer have a legitimate basis or standard for truth, then who determines what's important? Who designates what knowledge is valuable? Who sets the agenda? Clearly the postmodern agenda is not so much a pursuit of truth in the classical sense but a search for a different kind of "truth," one that seeks to redistribute power. The assumption is

either that the next seat of power will bring improvement over the old, or that a utopian view of power will develop.

In a more positive light, postmodernism offers opportunities for the Christian faith that are unmatched in the history of western thought. As we have witnessed the pluralization of thought, we have also seen that there is not one experiential base of knowledge or truth for all persons. Experience is an insufficient criterion. The extreme relativism that is associated with this is dangerous, but a more moderate view can invite a conversation process that is essential to the spread of the Gospel.

The theme of conversation in postmodernism is one of its greatest strengths. This ought to be embraced. Conversation must ultimately allow for openness and receptivity to the radical truth claims of the Christian faith. As we have seen throughout history, every age has been concerned with a *way of knowing*, but postmodernism has *no way of knowing* and thus culture is left without foundations. Indeed, we must consider the possibility that this position is correct. However, the Christian faith makes significant claims that ought to be heard at all levels of society and culture.

Christians provide an alternate *way of knowing* from the 'carefree skepticism' of postmodernism. While Christians are certainly apt to be first rate critical thinkers who understand the value of skepticism and thinking negatively about ultimate questions (*via negativa*), they also have a keen eye for affirming what we *can* and *do* know (*via positiva*). For almost two millennium Christians have affirmed that God revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ. In this sense, Christians cannot hold the anti-foundationalist position of the postmodernist.

But what Christians can do is affirm the potential for conversation inherent in postmodernism. Christians should position themselves as marginalized voices who offer a particular *way of knowing* that should have a place at the conversation table. They ought to be voices that have the audacity to claim that Christianity is true, and live lives that bear the same witness.

	TRADITIONAL	MODERN	POST-MODERN	GOSPEL
Symbol	The Priest	The Scientist	Rock Musician	Servant
Mode	Conservative	Inquisitive/Acquisitive	Emotive	Integrative/Whole
Center	Authority	Data-Centered	No Center	Christ-Centered
Orientation	Morality	Research	Experience	Relational
Key Thought	Tradition	Reason	Opinions	Revelation of Christ
Word	Obedience	Liberty	Self-Expression	Agape Love

The Paradox of Politicizing the Kingdom of God

William A. Dembski

In his book *For the Life of the World* the Eastern Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann remarked, "It is not the immorality of the crimes of man that reveal him as a fallen being; it is his 'positive ideal'—religious or secular—and his satisfaction with this ideal."¹ In this essay I shall argue that a politicized vision of the kingdom of God constitutes just such a fallen ideal. Politicizing the kingdom of God is ostensibly aimed at producing constructive social and political change, lifting the burden of the oppressed and establishing justice. No one will deny that these are worthy goals which ought earnestly to be sought. But when the kingdom of God is conditioned entirely by, for instance, "Jesus' message of a just society based on Israel's covenant tradition,"² as R. David Kaylor contends, the vitality of the kingdom dissipates, and all that is left is an empty shell.

The problem with a politicized vision of the kingdom is twofold: it fails on pragmatic grounds and it is logically incoherent. A politicized kingdom cannot accomplish its aims even on its own terms. This is the paradox referred to in the title of this essay. Politicizing the kingdom of God has exactly the opposite effect of producing the constructive social and political change that was intended by politicizing it in the first place, for it is only insofar as the kingdom breaks with and transcends human structures that it can become a valid—as opposed to a fallen—ideal for humanity. Thus in contrast to Kaylor and the liberation theologians, I contend that politicizing the kingdom fails in the very place where its greatest hope for success is thought to lie, namely, praxis.

In laying out such an argument, I am not placing an otherworldly kingdom³ in contradistinction to a politicized kingdom, nor am I denying to the kingdom wide-ranging political significance. I fully accept that the kingdom of God is political. What I cannot accept, however, is that the kingdom of God is political without remainder. The kingdom is not political in the sense that once we thoroughly understand the political nature of the kingdom, we understand it in all its richness and fullness. The idea that the kingdom is fully disclosed once all its political ramifications are understood is what I mean when I refer to a

"politicized kingdom." There are many properties that can legitimately be ascribed to the kingdom: the kingdom is a present reality; the kingdom is a not fully actualized reality; the kingdom is political; the kingdom is spiritual; the kingdom transcends history; the kingdom works itself out in history; etc. But when all such properties must in the end be unpacked in political terms, we have moved to a politicized vision of the kingdom of God.

In the sequel I shall concentrate mainly on two fundamental difficulties that face any politicized vision of the kingdom of God. The first is an impoverished view of human purpose and destiny. The kingdom of God is presumably the highest good for which humanity can strive. Yet within a politicized understanding of the kingdom this good cannot be conceived except as the reversal of oppression in society and the establishment of justice in its stead. A politicized vision of the kingdom makes the eradication of oppression and injustice the ultimate end of all human striving. To present the eradication of injustice and oppression as the ultimate end of human striving, however, seems to me utterly ill-conceived. For we may ask, what if we attain our desire? What if the liberationist vision of freeing humanity from oppression and injustice were accomplished? The best this vision has to offer is a society in which wealth and opportunity are equitably distributed, and in which no individual is at a disadvantage or oppressed.

Such a vision, however, is hardly utopian. The thing to realize is that a just socio-political order is by itself at best a very meager end. Politicizing the kingdom of God wrongly makes a just socio-political order the ultimate end. A just socio-political order, however, can still make for a miserable world. A just socio-political order can be a world without color, a world in which the only music we ever hear is Muzak, a world without great literature or art, a world replete with mental and physical disabilities, and a world in which the forces of nature conspire to destroy humanity. Just because we humans get our act together, and do the best we can with what we have been given, is no reason to get excited about the dawn of a new age. To be sure, through our own efforts we all too often succeed in making our lot much worse than it need be. But even if we stop shooting ourselves in the foot, life can still be a living hell. Talk to the loving spouse of someone who is suicidal and cannot be shaken from his or her depression. Political, economic, and social oppression cannot even begin to compare with what we are capable of doing to ourselves in the private world of our minds. Nor has any liberation theologian promised that psychological health will follow in the train of a just socio-political order.

A politicized vision of the kingdom works by negation. It seeks to rid the socio-political realm of the oppressive and unjust things we are doing to each other. Such a vision finds meaning through house-cleaning, i.e., through ordering our socio-political world. But is this world worth ordering in the first place? This last question admits no adequate answer in purely socio-political terms. One might even argue that a little socio-political oppression is beneficial because all the great works of literature, art, and music have been born in situations of conflict and oppression, and that a world without socio-political oppression is so bland as not to be worth engaging. I do not personally endorse this line

¹Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), p. 100.

²R. David Kaylor, *Jesus the Prophet: His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), back cover.

³Such an otherworldly kingdom is Kaylor's foil throughout his recent text on the kingdom of God. See for instance Kaylor, p. 75, where he explicitly rejects an "otherworldly interpretation of the kingdom."

of argument, but I mention it because it points up the difficulty of pressing the political aspect of the kingdom too far.

In purely socio-political terms the best we can say to the question Why pursue a just social order? is that we have found it the best way to give meaning to our existence. We can think here of Camus's physician in *The Plague* who works desperately to stem the plague that is ravaging his locale. Why doesn't the physician sit back and accept the plague, like the priest who simply embraces it as God's righteous judgment against sin? The physician after all knows better than anyone that his best efforts are doomed—the people will continue to die like flies from the plague. We are naturally inclined to think of the physician as noble, certainly more noble than the priest. But how is our approbation of the physician anything more than itself culturally (or perhaps even biologically) conditioned?

Is not our approbation of the physician simply an arbitrary way we have chosen to make sense out of our world—to view solidarity with the sick, poor, weak, and oppressed as a virtue even though we might just as well have chosen to view it as a vice (the Nazis did this after all, viewing pity for the weak as itself a sign of weakness, and worthy of contempt). Camus constantly returned to the myth of Sisyphus, extolling Sisyphus for trying to find meaning in a meaningless world—Sisyphus, who ever rolls the rock up the hill with no hope of the rock ever getting up the hill and staying there. Sisyphus constructs meaning for his life in a meaningless world. If that is all we are doing—and a politicized vision of the kingdom can offer us no assurances to the contrary—why work for justice and against oppression? Sooner or later self-interest and justice come into conflict, and it is the rare individual who opts for the latter.

I have just argued that a world with a fully just socio-political order, and thus a world devoid of socio-political problems, can nonetheless be a world filled with (non-socio-political) ills to which a politicized vision of the kingdom will be unable to offer any solutions. In effect, the world may continue to be a terrible place even if liberation theologians have their way and cure one set of ills, namely the political ones.⁴ In offering such an argument I have so far concentrated on factors external to the socio-political realm. I pointed to disease, natural disasters, boredom, and death as problems that would continue to undermine humanity's quest for meaning and purpose, regardless what advances have been made in furthering social and political justice. I want next to focus on the other fundamental difficulty that faces any politicized vision of the kingdom of God.

⁴In fairness to liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, I do not mean to suggest that political liberation is an isolated concern, disconnected from other human concerns. Political liberation has far reaching ethical implications (see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), ch. 7). Politics is deeply ramified in the human situation, as even Aristotle recognized in his work on the topic. The point I am continually pressing in this essay is the limitations that attend a purely political point of view.

Although the difficulties created by such external factors can be disconcerting to a political vision of the kingdom, such factors take second seat to the internal factors that call into question whether a politicized vision of the kingdom is even capable of a coherent vision of social and political justice. Should its conception of justice be coherent and valid, a politicized vision of the kingdom could at least maintain that whenever one seeks social and political justice, one is seeking a genuine good, even if the achievement of this good does not turn the world into a paradise. But what if the conception of justice offered by a politicized kingdom is fundamentally flawed, and cannot be salvaged save by a richer conception of the kingdom that is not purely political?

This is not an idle question, nor is it motivated by a doctrine of original sin or the fall. Even without a theological doctrine of human sinfulness, we should have pause about the capacity of humans (liberation theologians included) to judge what properly constitutes the justice that is supposed to bring an end to oppression. It is so obvious to us now that slavery was wrong. It is so obvious to us now that the systematic racial discrimination practiced in the United States throughout the first two-thirds of this century was wrong. The rightness of the emancipation of slaves and of the civil rights movement are by now patently obvious to everyone, save a loony fringe. But their rightness was not so obvious in the past. We can congratulate ourselves on our wonderful hindsight about the past, but the possibility remains very live and real that we are woefully blind about the present.

Liberation theologians may well respond, "That's what we need prophets for," and then proceed to style themselves as prophets capable of accurately discerning the injustices of our present age. The question remains, however, how to determine whether our prophets are accurately discerning the injustices of this present age? Despite their best intentions, prophets are always in danger of deluding themselves. Please understand, it is not my intention simply to heap up doubts about politicized visions of the kingdom in order then in turn to advance my own vision of the kingdom. The doubts I am raising are not *mere* doubts, but *substantial* doubts, for the promises to end oppression and violence have often left the lips of those bent on oppression and violence. This was certainly true of Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution. It was also true of Hitler and his Nazi regime. Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda documentary of the 1934 Nuremberg rally (*Der Triumph des Willens*) leaves no doubt that Hitler viewed himself as Germany's great liberator (*Erlöser*), to free Germany from the oppression she was experiencing in the aftermath of World War I.

The possibility of false prophets and false conceptions of justice ought certainly to worry advocates of a politicized kingdom. Whence the criteria, whence the ethical norms by which to judge that one's vision of justice is not oppression by another name, but justice indeed? Kaylor, for instance, will look to Israel's covenant tradition. But is that covenant tradition itself purely political, and if so how can we trust it? Liberationist, feminist, and womanist theologians have found plenty to criticize as oppressive in the Old Testament tradition. The Israelite's complete destruction of whole towns without any show of mercy even to children is as

much a part of this tradition as compassion for the stranger.

To sum up, a politicized vision of the kingdom faces two fundamental difficulties, one external, the other internal. The external difficulty is that at best it seems to offer only a partial solution to the human condition. Even if we bracket out the question of sin and the need for a "spiritual savior," a politicized vision of the kingdom leaves untouched broad swathes of human misery and malaise. The internal difficulty, on the other hand, is that a politicized vision of the kingdom does not seem to have the resources within itself to produce the coherent conception of justice that is needed to foster authentic political change.

In concluding this essay, I wish to locate precisely where I see a politicized vision of the kingdom as having veered from the mark. In his book *Jesus through the Centuries*, Jaroslav Pelikan includes a chapter entitled "The Liberator." In this chapter Pelikan discusses Martin Luther King's understanding of, among other things, Jesus as liberator, the kingdom of God, and the nature of political injustice. In tying these matters together, Pelikan writes,

When an eminent scholar of black literature in America was asked why Martin Luther King had not become a Marxist and why those who followed him had accepted his philosophy of nonviolence, he unhesitatingly replied: "Because of the overpowering force of the figure of Jesus." That was also the reason in many cases for the positive response, painfully slow in coming though it was, that King's message called forth in white Christians.⁵

When the kingdom of God loses its connection to the *king* of this kingdom, namely Jesus, it is set adrift, and can never quite recover its moorings. In supporting this claim I have no air tight arguments. Nevertheless, I can appeal to the experience of those who to my mind have done the most good to promote the kingdom, and in every instance I can think of, their vision of the kingdom, while sharing crucial insights with liberation theologians, has transcended a politicized vision of the kingdom. The transcendent reference point of the kingdom of God is Jesus Christ. This is not a political Jesus, but rather a Jesus who defines and undergirds politics itself.

Like Martin Luther King, Karl Barth refused to see the kingdom of God in purely political terms. As Barth's biographer Eberhard Busch notes,

It was striking that Barth . . . went on to make a clear and fundamental distinction between Christ or the kingdom of God on the one hand and human actions, whether conservative or revolutionary, on the other. [Quoting Barth] "The kingdom of God does not first begin with our movements of protest. It is the revolution which is *before* all revolutions, as it is *before* the whole prevailing order of things."⁶

Both King and Barth spoke as prophets to the evils of their day, King to the evil of racism, Barth to the evil of Nazism.

Nevertheless, they spoke as prophets not in virtue of a commitment to a politicized vision of the kingdom, but because they saw in the person of Jesus the one who gave substance to that kingdom. For them Jesus was not simply a political figure trying desperately to implement a certain socio-political system. Rather, he was the foundation to which all political systems had to look for their meaning and fulfillment.

What is at stake here is a changed perspective. Is Jesus a political figure who finds his meaning by being embedded in a certain socio-political system (i.e., the so-called kingdom of God)? Or is the kingdom of God a political reality which finds its meaning by being embedded in the person of Jesus? To opt for the latter is not to succumb to "the tendency to universalize and overly theologize Jesus' message,"⁷ nor is it to spiritualize or interiorize "the kingdom into a reality within the heart of the individual."⁸ It is rather to give the kingdom a reference point from which salutary political change can be effected. To give up this reference point is to have to face the internal and external difficulties that inevitably face a politicized kingdom. On the other hand, we have the example of King and Barth, who never lost the practical edge that the liberation theologians are so eager to recover, but who consistently assigned to the kingdom this transcendent reference point, all the while maintaining their prophetic voice.

All the wisdom of the world is childish foolishness in comparison with the acknowledgment of Christ. For what is more wonderful than the unspeakable mystery, that the Son of God, the image of the eternal Father, took upon him the nature of man. Doubtless, he helped his supposed father, Joseph, to build houses; for Joseph was a carpenter. What will they of Nazareth think at the day of judgment, when they shall see Christ sitting in his divine majesty; surely they will be astonished and say: Lord, thou helpest build my house, how comest thou now to this high honor?

When Jesus was born, doubtless, he cried and wept like other children, and his mother tended him as other mothers tend their children. As he grew up, he was submissive to his parents, and waited on them, and carried his supposed father's dinner to him, and when he came back, Mary, no doubt, often said: "My dear little Jesus, where has thou been?" He that takes not offence at the simple, lowly, and mean course of the life of Christ, is endued with high divine art and wisdom; yea, has a special gift of God in the Holy Ghost. Let us ever bear in mind, that our blessed Savior thus humbled and abased himself, yielding even to the contumelious death of the cross for the comfort of us poor miserable, and damned creatures.

—Luther

⁵Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 217-8.

⁶Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, translated by J. Bowden (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 111.

⁷Kaylor, p. 84.

⁸Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985), p. 161.

The American Political Establishment and the Mainline Church: Time to Pick up the Gauntlet

Eric J. Laverentz

It was scarcely more than a footnote in the national news on that last Saturday in April, during the final year of the Carter presidency. Rarely is it mentioned in political circles. Yet Pat Robertson labeled it "a historic moment for the nation." Bill Bright deemed April 29, 1980 "the most important day in this nation's history apart from its founding."¹ On that day a quarter to a half million Christian fundamentalists filled the mall in Washington D.C. The rally began at six a.m. and ended twelve hours later. Included in the program were 47 speakers, several prayers of national redemption, and a litany of patriotic and religious songs. Although the rally's organizer's fervently denied any political intent behind "Washington for Jesus", the rally has served as a focus event for the persons who would later come to form the Christian Coalition; whose presence now in the American political arena is well noted.

Since its rise to political prominence the Christian Right has been feverishly attacked by moderate and liberal Christians. After the 1994 elections Tony Campolo went as far as to form an "Anti-Christian Coalition". The National Council of Churches, after the 1992 Republican National Convention, warned that "Republicans stood on the threshold of blasphemy."² The Christian Coalition wielded a decisive influence at the convention, fostering a rhetoric which placed God in the Republican camp. The Interfaith Alliance, a liberal leaning multi-religion political advocacy group, operates specifically to monitor and counter the activities of the Religious Right. No politically involved mainline Christian can get two sentences out of their mouth before mentioning the Christian Coalition or Ralph Reed or Pat Robertson. Quite simply their influence and agenda dominate religion's claim upon the public arena. To speak of Christianity and politics, one must speak of the Christian Right. When the average citizen thinks of a politically involved Christian they picture a Robertson crone. It need not be this way, however. Mainline Christianity can learn from the model of the Christian Right, regain its position of political authority, and influence the national culture.

But despite what one may think of all the rhetoric, it should be recognized that the Christian Coalition has done a service to the mainline churches on two accounts. First, with the help of some academic discourse and legislative initiative, Christianity has once again been established as a relevant figure in the public square. By virtue of a consistent and persevering attempt to have a unified voice on important issues, the Christian coalition has secured the Church's place as a key political power. Christians have

greater freedom to express their faith in terms of public policy.

Secondly, the Christian Right has potentially energized the mainline churches by demonstrating the need for an even more active and powerful Christian voice in the political process. There was a time when a proclamation from the National Council of Churches was a decisive factor in a legislative struggle, a prize to be coveted for any politician looking to secure a vote. Today, most politicians don't care where the National Council of Churches comes down on an issue. However, they are listening to the politically conservative Christian Coalition.

The mainline churches are in a new political game playing by a set of rules geared for a situation which no longer exists. The model of placing a lobbyist in Washington who merely carries the concerns of the denominational leadership to Congress is no longer effective because of its inability to demonstrate grassroots support. Denominational church agenda still carries with it a ring of being handed down from on high rather than an outpouring of sentiment from the rank and file membership. Such an approach, despite the virtue of what the Church's lobbyists may be advocating is no longer effective. Irregardless of its moral solidity, such a type of advocacy is legislatively hollow. Ralph Reed boldly claims that the effectiveness of their political movement depends upon the apathy of the other 85% of Americans who call themselves Christians. Out of sheer befuddlement, mainline Christian political activity is reduced to simply responding to the Christian Coalition agenda. Sadly, out of frustration, apathy, or indifference many Christians have dropped out of the political process altogether. If the mainline church desires to once again exert a competent influence in the political process it must make several important moves.

1. The mainline church must work to become a proactive part of the agenda setting process.

Any political strategist knows that the group or individual who creates the agenda more often than not determines the outcome. Mainline churches have not been a part of any national political agenda setting since the Great Society. Those old coalitions are now all but gone and the mainline churches find themselves outside the loop. If the mainline church desires to once again become a decisive political voice it must move its apathetic eighty-five percent from a reactionary position to a proactive one.

The mainline churches must begin fashioning and promoting their own agenda without ceasing comment and action upon the agenda of the Right. This was the strategy of the Coalition, or its predecessors. In 1980 few were talking about the issues to which their drum beat over a decade and a half ago. Speech of values, morals, and the need of religion in the public sphere was unfashionable and unpopular. Today it is accepted that a properly functioning society must inculcate virtue in its citizens. The increased interest in all things "spiritual" has provided the church with an attentive audience; but what does the mainline church offer in terms of a political voice?

Building a centrist coalition is the political equivalent of passing a camel through the eye of the needle. There are two good reasons why. First, rarely is the message of the middle inspirational. Usually it is born of pragmatism and

¹Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1988, p.20.

²Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 1993, p.50.

compromise, two concepts rarely flashy enough for the front page. Secondly, those in the middle are often too content to act. The mainline church must provide some sort of empathis for these people to act.

A lobbyist for the United Methodist Church shared his frustration with the political apathy of the mainline church membership. He believed the solution lay in the effective preaching of the gospel. Of course many ministers already *do* preach the Gospel and preach it well. Rarely is the Gospel's relevance to what we do as citizens of a republican democracy illumined. As always, with freedom comes responsibility. It is crucial for the church to make that connection between the gospel, everyday life, and political responsibility not only for the personal well-being of the members of its body, but also for those outside its walls who are at the mercy of the government. As well for the creation of a climate in which favored legislative initiatives can prosper.

Current American political climate is dependent upon fear, class warfare, and racial mistrust. This is not fertile soil in which to sow seeds of national redemption or to retool a system which can rekindle a belief in the American Dream for all our citizenry. The mainline churches cannot allow themselves to be dragged into this political morass, into the volley of explosive words and phrases which our leaders lob at one another. The mudslinging takes us further and further away from meaningful, progressive exchange. The mainline church must not only stand against the public policy which this climate engenders but against the climate as well--against the negative campaigning, the muckraking, the politics of division, the shortsightedness. The biggest mistake of the Christian Right has been its unwillingness to challenge these things as they have challenged the government. Instead they have allowed their candidates to indulge in divisive rhetoric and irresponsible campaigning.

It has been popular for some time to bemoan the lack of civility in American society. That is not my point. The church can influence the political process by transforming culture. Granted, the pathway from Christian virtue into palpable, working public policy is fraught with difficulty. There is no serious proposal geared at addressing the growing underclass in America, a phenomenon which threatens the economic stability of all, which is grounded in anything but cutting taxes or middle and upper class angst.

2. *Any Christian political movement needs to be firmly grounded in prayer.*

Why has the Christian Right been so successful? They pray together. How often is a prayer for national redemption uttered at a mainline worship service? Or a prayer for our political leaders? Or for wisdom in dealing with a particular issue? Or when was the last time anyone was invited to a prayer rally for America at a mainline church? Too many Christians have a misplaced, ingrained fear that the mixing of prayer with political ends is somehow theologically improper or irresponsible. However, what could be more important than a prayer for the nation or for the vindication of a deeply held belief? Jefferson's "wall of separation" between church and state has been extended to people's spiritual lives, far past its original intent. Paul reminded the church at Rome that they were "subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1), who had been given their

authority by God to be a "servant for your good". (Romans 13:4) Not to pray for good government and wise civic leadership is as irresponsible as to not pray for good church leadership. Moreover, earnest community prayer builds unity, cohesion, and resolve--commodities which anyone who has ever attempted to accomplish any political end can easily appreciate. In *The Cross and Switchblade*, David Wilkerson writes that one way to unleash the power of prayer is to publicly pray for miracles. The mainline churches ought to pray fervently together for the miracle that every man, woman, and child in this country could have a decent education, a way to provide bread for themself, and a place to live.

3. *The mainline church needs to start developing a grassroots network of support for its political agenda.*

The advent of polls, faxes, mass mailings, and the Internet have given the average voter more power than they ever before. The Washington political establishment is well connected to these modes of communication. Lobbyists who cannot produce evidence of a significant groundswell of voter support are at a severe disadvantage, no matter what the moral imperative of their position might be. The days when lobbyists can merely focus upon connections and influential speech are over. It is no longer enough for a lobbyist to claim that they represent the "Ecumenical Committee on Rights and Social Justice" and to present a legislative aide with a list of their positions on the various House and or Senate resolutions. If the representative from the committee can instead say "If your congressman votes against House Resolution #2314 I'll have two thousand letters, three thousand faxes, a hundred angry constituents on your office stoop, and I'll tie up your phones all the next day," it'll get any legislators attention. More than moral rectitude, more than access, more than even financial giving, public support is the ultimate political commodity because it is easily translatable into votes.

4. *The mainline church must resist allowing itself to be tied to either political party.*

Ronald Walters in *Black Presidential Politics in America* advocates allowing the "the Black vote to exercise a 'balance of power' position between the two major political parties." Instead of allowing itself to be tied to any one party. Walters calls this the "inter-leverage" strategy. Its purpose is to maximize Black influence over the party agenda. His thinking is that if one party knows it can be assured of the support of a certain constituency within its ranks, the effectiveness of that group's agenda is compromised. By the same token, the other political party, which knows that regardless of what it does will be unable to secure any of that constituency's vote will pay even less attention to their agenda. Therefore it is in the group's best interest to simultaneously court both parties on an election by election basis, holding out for the most platform influence, candidate representation, convention support.³

An excellent example of the effectiveness of this strategy is the so called "Perot voters" during the 92, 94, and

³Ronald W. Walters, *Black Presidential Politics in America*, State University of New York Press, 1988, Chapters 5 and 6, quote taken from p.139.

current elections. For the most part, the Republican party was more successful at courting these voters and the results showed in the off-year Congressional elections. However, the Christian right (which is not an entirely separate subset) must be given its due in the stunning Republican takeover. The Christian Right is given little respect by the Democratic party. By way of example, the author was witness to a lowly Democratic Capitol Hill intern purposefully giving a hurried Ralph Reed incorrect directions to the Speakers' office. But why should the Democrats respect the Christian Coalition? They know that all but the most conservative of their ranks have no chance of attracting any Christian Coalition support. In contrast, both Clinton and Bush in 92, as well as the vast majority of current Republican candidates, have gesticulated before a chart-wielding, Texas billionaire. A grassroots influenced mainline church political agenda should be uniquely situated in the political middle ground, upon turf able to be approached by both Democrats and publicans.

Moreover, there is a theological danger in endorsing either party as the chosen one of God. This has been the Christian Right's mistake recently and the mainline church's mistake during the 60's and 70's with the Democratic party. In a two party system both parties are so necessarily diverse that any Christian would have to think twice before linking arms with the entire membership.

5. *Patience must be a virtue of the leadership.*

The mainline churches must allow time for the message to take. It usually takes at least a decade to go from a movement along the edges of society to one in the mainstream. It was ten years from the time Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus until the time Lyndon Johnson used the phrase "We Shall Overcome" in a national address, and that doesn't count the time Southern black leadership spent planning before Ms. Parks act of courage. Some trace the 1994 Republican capture of Congress back to plans which began during the Nixon administration! Potential presidential contenders begin anticipating societal trends more than two elections before the one in which they plan to run. A group must have the patience to hammer away at its message for years before they begin to see its effects trickle into the national consciousness. The investment must be made with a resolve to wait for a significant return years later.

Influencing the national culture is no easy task. It must take a serious commitment on the part of the church leadership, local pastors, and laity. Yet during this time when the mainline churches are struggling to stake out an identity and achieve a new relevancy, such a movement could be quite medicinal. Their agenda must be progressive, balanced, rational, inspirational, and for a nation in search of hope, redemptive. The gauntlet has been thrown down in the face of the apathetic eighty-five percent. The cost of this apathy on the part of the Christian may eventually be measured in terms of freedoms. Mainline Christians must pick up the gauntlet in order to transform the political culture into "God's servant for the good."

Dr. Fundamentalism:

An Obituary for J. Gresham Machen

H. L. Mencken

The Rev. J. Gresham Machen, D.D., who died out in North Dakota on New Year's Day, got, on the whole, a bad press while he lived, and even his obituaries did much less than justice to him. To newspaper reporters, as to other antinomians, a combat between Christians over a matter of dogma is essentially a comic affair, and in consequence Dr. Machen's heroic struggles to save Calvinism in the Republic were usually depicted in ribald, or, at all events, in somewhat skeptical terms. The generality of readers, I suppose gathered thereby the notion that he was simply another Fundamentalist on the order of William Jennings Bryan and the simian faithful of Appalachia. But he was actually a man of great learning, and, what is more, of sharp intelligence.

What caused him to quit the Princeton Theological Seminary and found a seminary of his own was his complete inability, as a theologian, to square the disingenuous evasions of Modernism with the fundamentals of Christian doctrine. He saw clearly that the only effects that could follow diluting and polluting Christianity in the Modernist manner would be its complete abandonment and ruin. Either it was true or it was not true. If, as he believed, it was true, then there could be no compromise with persons who sought to whittle away its essential postulates, however respectable their motives.

Thus he fell out with the reformers who have been trying, in late years, to convert the Presbyterian Church into a kind of literary and social club, devoted vaguely to good works. Most of the other Protestant churches have gone the same way, but Dr. Machen's attention, as a Presbyterian, was naturally concentrated upon his own connection. His one and only purpose was to hold it resolutely to what he conceived to be the true faith. When that enterprise met with opposition he fought vigorously, and though he lost in the end and was forced out of Princeton it must be manifest that he marched off to Philadelphia with all the honors of war.

II

My interest in Dr. Machen while he lived, though it was large, was not personal, for I never had the honor of meeting him. Moreover, the doctrine that he preached seemed to me, and still seems to me, to be excessively dubious. I stand much more chance of being converted to spiritualism, to Christian Science, or even to the New Deal than to Calvinism, which occupies a place, in my cabinet of private horrors, but little removed from cannibalism. But Dr. Machen had the same clear right to believe in it that I have to disbelieve in it, and though I could not yield to his reasoning I could at least admire, and did greatly admire, his remarkable clarity and cogency as an apologist, allowing him his primary assumptions.

These assumptions were also made, at least in theory,

by his opponents, and thereby he had them by the ear. Claiming to be Christians as he was, and of the Calvinish persuasion, they endeavored fatuously to get rid of all the inescapable implications of their position. On the one hand they sought to retain membership in the fellowship of the faithful, but on the other hand they presumed to repeal and reenact with amendments the body of doctrine on which that fellowship rested. In particular, they essayed to overhaul the scriptural authority which lay at the bottom of the whole matter, retaining what coincided with their private notions and rejecting whatever upset them.

Upon this contumacy Dr. Machen fell with loud shouts of alarm. He denied absolutely that anyone had a right to revise and sophisticate Holy Writ. Either it was the Word of God or it was not the Word of God, and if it was, then it was equally authoritative in all its details, and had to be accepted or rejected as a whole. Anyone was free to reject it, but no one was free to mutilate it or to read things into it that were not there. Thus the issue with the Modernists was clearly joined, and Dr. Machen argued them quite out of court, and sent them scurrying back to their literary and sociological *Kaffeeklatsche*. His operations, to be sure, did not prove that Holy Writ was infallible either as history or as theology, but they at least disposed of those who proposed to read it as they might read a newspaper, believing what they chose and rejecting what they chose.

III

In his own position there was never the least shadow of inconsistency. When the Prohibition imbecility fell upon the country, and a multitude of theological quacks, including not a few eminent Presbyterians, sought to read support for it into the New Testament, he attacked them with great vigor, and routed them easily. He not only proved that there was nothing in the teachings of Jesus to support so monstrous a folly; he proved abundantly that the known teachings of Jesus were unalterably against it. And having set forth that proof, he refused, as a convinced and honest Christian, to have anything to do with the dry *jehad*.

This rebellion against a craze that now seems so incredible and so far away was not the chief cause of his break with his ecclesiastical superiors, but it was probably responsible for a large part of their extraordinary dudgeon against him. The Presbyterian Church, like the other evangelical churches, was taken for a dizzy ride by Prohibition. Led into the heresy by fanatics of low mental visibility, it presently found itself cheek by jowl with all sorts of criminals, and fast losing the respect of sensible people. Its bigwigs thus became extremely jumpy on the subject, and resented bitterly every exposure of their lamentable folly.

The fantastic William Jennings Bryan, in his day the country's most distinguished Presbyterian layman, was against Dr. Machen on the issue of Prohibition but with him on the issue of Modernism. But Bryan's support, of course, was of little value or consolation to so intelligent a man. Bryan was a Fundamentalist of the Tennessee or barnyard school. His theological ideas were those of a somewhat backward child of eight, and his defense of Holy Writ at Dayton during the Scopes trial was so ignorant and stupid that it must have given Dr. Machen a great deal of

pain. Dr. Machen himself was to Bryan as the Matterhorn is to a wart. His Biblical studies had been wide and deep, and he was familiar with the almost interminable literature of the subject. Moreover, he was an adept theologian, and had a wealth of professional knowledge to support his ideas. Bryan could only bawl.

IV

It is my belief, as a friendly neutral in all such high and ghostly matters, that the body of doctrine known as Modernism is completely incompatible, not only with anything rationally describable as Christianity, but also with anything deserving to pass as religion in general. Religion, if it is to retain any genuine significance, can never be reduced to a series of sweet attitudes, possible to anyone not actually in jail for felony. It is, on the contrary, a corpus of powerful and profound convictions, many of them not open to logical analysis. Its inherent improbabilities are not sources of weakness to it, but of strength. It is potent in a man in proportion as he is willing to reject all overt evidences, and accept its fundamental postulates, however unprovable they may be by secular means, as massive and incontrovertible facts.

These postulates, at least in the Western world, have been challenged in recent years on many grounds, and in consequence there has been a considerable decline in religious belief. There was a time, two or three centuries ago, when the overwhelming majority of educated men were believers, but that is apparently true no longer. Indeed, it is my impression that at least two-thirds of them are now frank skeptics. But it is one thing to reject religion altogether, and quite another thing to try to save it by pumping out of it all its essential substance, leaving it in the equivocal position of a sort of pseudo-science, comparable to graphology, "education," or osteopathy.

That, it seems to me, is what the Modernists have done, no doubt with the best intentions in the world. They have tried to get rid of all the logical difficulties of religion, and yet preserve a generally pious cast of mind. It is a vain enterprise. What they have left, once they have achieved their imprudent scavenging, is hardly more than a row of hollow platitudes, as empty of psychological force and effect as so many nursery rhymes. They may be good people and they may even be contented and happy, but they are no more religious than Dr. Einstein. Religion is something else again—in Henrik Isben's phrase, something far more deep-down-diving and mud-upbringing. Dr. Machen tried to impress that obvious fact upon his fellow adherents of the Geneva Mohammed. He failed—but he was undoubtedly right.

If martyrdom consists in confessing God, then every person who conducts himself with purity in the knowledge of God and who obeys his commandments, is a martyr in his life and in his words: for in whatever way his soul is separated from his body, he will pour out his faith like blood, both during his life and at the moment of his death.

—Clement of Alexandria

The Virgin Birth at PTS— Now and Then

«Creedal Colloquy»

"I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . . who was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and was made man." —The Nicene Creed

With this issue the PTR begins a regular series of articles in which we look at key doctrines of the Christian faith. In particular, we shall be concerned with how these doctrines are and have been treated on the PTS campus. Our focus in this first «Creedal Colloquy» is the virgin birth, especially as it was treated by J. Gresham Machen in his book *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. When this book by Machen was published back in 1930, it was hailed by friend and foe alike as a work of careful and intelligent scholarship. For the benefit of those unfamiliar with this great New Testament scholar, we offer a selection from the conclusion of this book by Machen.

Unlike in Machen's day, there is considerably more diversity about the virgin birth these days at Princeton Seminary. In their team-taught systematic theology course (TH202, fall 1994) we will find Prof. Bruce McCormack affirming the virgin birth and claiming that with his TH202 lecture on the topic, he has made the first serious attempt in many years to publicly defend this doctrine at Princeton Seminary. In this same course, teaching together with Prof. McCormack, we will find Prof. Nancy Duff denying not the doctrine of the virgin birth itself, but its importance. Thus in a lecture she gave two years ago Prof. Duff said that the question of Jesus' Divine conception is a question "according to the flesh," and one which "divides us over the wrong issue." What is important is that God was born into human history. To ask how Jesus was born is not, according to Prof. Duff, the important question.

Prof. Donald Capps, who teaches pastoral counseling here and is a minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, goes further—much further. He denies the virgin birth outright and asserts that Jesus was an illegitimate child conceived through the rape of Mary. In his book *The Child's Song: Religious Abuse of Children* (pp. 55, 108) Prof. Capps writes:

The concept of the virginal conception of Jesus makes it difficult for adults to think of him as a child who could have experienced any form of child abuse whatsoever, for it carries with it the corollary notion that adults held the child Jesus in reverence and awe. The concept thus places a halo around the childhood Jesus, and desensitizes adults to the realities of childhood, so that they fail to hear the cries of the children in their own midst, and the crying child within. If one chooses to believe this concept, one should at least be aware that the child Jesus—and the child Mary—surely did not. But it would be a sign of our maturity as Christian adults if we relinquished it. . . .

While it is impossible to know at what age Jesus would have become aware of the circumstances surrounding his birth, we may assume that he would

have learned them as a young child, and that he would view his illegitimacy as a personal tragedy, and himself as the innocent victim of a situation he could do nothing to alter or change. The questions that beg to be asked, therefore, are: How, then, would knowledge of his illegitimacy affect him personally as a child? How would it influence his self-understanding? What measures would he take as a child to shield himself from the fact that he was perceived by those around him as deeply and irrevocably flawed.

Against the tendency to minimize the impact of childhood experience, I want to offer the . . . thesis, that virtually everything that Jesus said and did as an adult is traceable, in one way or another, to his awareness of being an illegitimate child. His illegitimacy would be profoundly self-defining, and his career as a prophet would not have taken the form that it did were it not for his illegitimacy. Especially noteworthy would be the relationship between his knowledge of his illegitimacy and what is commonly judged to be the core of his own religious experience and public message, his unusually close and personal relationship to God.

Question: How can an individual whose identity is wholly determined by the "awareness of being an illegitimate child" be the savior of the world, much less God in the flesh?

From Chapter 15, "Conclusion and Consequences," J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper, 1930).

At this point we are brought to the last question with which it is necessary for us to deal—the question, namely, as to the importance of belief in the virgin birth to the Christian man. That question is being argued eagerly at the present day; there are many who tell us that, though they believe in the virgin birth themselves, they do not think that that belief is important for all men or essential even to the corporate witness of the Church.

This attitude, we are convinced, is radically wrong, and with a brief grounding of this conviction regarding it our discussion may properly be brought to a close. What is the importance of the virgin birth?

In the first place, the question is obviously important for the general question of the authority of the Bible. It is perfectly clear that the New Testament teaches the virgin birth of Christ; about that there can be no manner of doubt. There is no serious question as to the *interpretation* of the Bible at this point. Everyone admits that the Bible represents Jesus as having been conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary. The only question is whether in making that representation the Bible is true or false.

If the latter alternative is chosen, if the Bible is regarded as being wrong in what it says about the birth of Christ, then obviously the authority of the Bible, in any high sense, is gone. It is true, men use that word "authority" in very loose senses today. Why may not the Bible be authoritative, they say, even though what it says about the birth of Jesus without human father is not true? . . . May not even these stories of His birth, which we are obliged to reject as history, possess a profounder authority as expressions of the homage due to Him who led men into communion with the Father God? . . .

What shall we say of such an attitude as that? Briefly we can say this of it—that if it is correct the Christian religion, as it has existed for some nineteen hundred years, must now at length be given up. It is not this or that element of the Christian religion that is here at stake, but all elements of it, or rather the Christian religion as an organic whole. What is this modern religion that is founded upon a Bible whose authority is altogether in the sphere of inspiration and not at all in the sphere of external fact? Is it not a religion whose fundamental tenet is the ability of man to save himself? Give us the moral and spiritual values of the Christian religion, it is said in effect, give us the inspiration of the teaching and example of Jesus, and we have all that is needed for our souls; not for us is there any need of dependence upon the question what happened or did not happen in the external world nineteen hundred years ago. Dependence upon those things belonged to the childhood stage of religion, but we, as distinguished from the men of past ages, find our God here and now in the depths of our own souls. What care we how Jesus entered into the world? However that may be, His teaching stirs our souls and leads us out into a larger life.

Such is the modern religion that is independent of events like the virgin birth. The adherents of it are, indeed, seldom quite consistent; for if they were consistent they could not depend upon the example of Jesus, as many of them do. The authority of the Bible, they say, lies altogether in the sphere of religion and ethics and not at all in the sphere of external history. But what is the logical result of a principle like that? Is it not to make the authority of the Bible and to make the Christian religion independent of the question whether such a person as Jesus ever lived upon this earth? That Jesus lived in Palestine nineteen hundred years ago is surely an assertion in the sphere of external history; and if so the authority of the Bible and the truth of the Christian religion cannot, according to the principle with which we are now dealing, be staked upon it. Thus upon this principle we have logically what B. B. Warfield aptly called a "Christless Christianity"; even the very existence of Jesus is unnecessary to the sublimated religion that is independent of events in the external world.

In the second place, the question of the virgin birth is important as a test for a man to apply to himself or to others to determine whether one holds a naturalistic or a supernaturalistic view regarding Jesus Christ. There are two generically different views about Jesus, and they are rooted in to generically different view about God and the world. According to one view, God is immanent in the universe in the sense that the universe is the necessary unfolding of His life; the Jesus of Nazareth is a part of that unfolding, a supreme product of the same divine forces that are elsewhere operative in the world. According to the other view, God is the Creator of the universe, immanent in it but also eternally separate from it and free; and Jesus of Nazareth came into the universe from outside the universe, to do what nature could never do. The former view is the view of modern naturalism in many different forms; the latter view is the view of the Bible and of the Christian Church.

How can it be determined which of these two views is held by any particular modern man? Obviously that question is best answered when it is made concrete, and it is best

made concrete when it deals with the supernatural as it appears in the New Testament books. But at what point may the issue be best raised; what question may be asked to determine whether a man holds a naturalistic or a supernaturalistic view of Jesus Christ?

The matter is by no means so simple as at first it might appear. Perhaps the first question which might occur to the layman, as being the question to ask, is the question, "Do you believe in the deity of Christ?" It is difficult to imagine any assertion more utterly meaningless in the religious parlance of the present day than the assertion, "I believe in the deity of Christ," or the assertion, "I believe that Jesus is God." These assertions have meaning only when the terms that they contain are defined; the assertion, "Jesus is God," depends for its significance altogether upon what is meant by "God."

But unfortunately that term, like the term "deity," is often defined today to mean something entirely different from what the simple Christian holds it to mean. The simple Christian, like Jesus of Nazareth, is a convinced theist; indeed, he is such a convinced theist that no other view of God save the theistic view ever comes into his mind. But many leaders of the modern Church and hosts of modern ministers, unlike the simple Christian and unlike Jesus of Nazareth, are not theists at all. They are either pantheists or positivists, and their pantheistic or positivistic opinions determine what they mean by "God." . . .

Evidently, therefore, if we want to discover anyone's position in the great religious issue of the present day, we must be more specific; we must single out some particular manifestation of the supernatural as the point at which the issue shall be raised. . . .

Our first impulse might be to single out the supreme miracle in the New Testament—namely, the resurrection of Christ. Surely, it might be held, if a man is willing to say, "I believe in the resurrection of Christ," he has parted company with modern naturalism and has taken his stand squarely with the despised believers in the supernatural Person whom the New Testament presents.

But here again first appearances are deceptive, and an assertion that to the plain man seems to be very definite is in modern parlance not definite at all. The assertion, "I believe in the resurrection of Christ," has in itself today almost as little meaning as the assertion, "I believe that Jesus is God," so abysmal is the intellectual morass into which we have been flung by the modern business of "interpreting" perfectly plain language in a sense utterly different from the sense in which it has always hitherto been used. The truth is that the expression "resurrection of Christ" is used in widely different senses today. Some men mean by it merely the continued influence of Jesus; others use it in a mystical sense to indicate the presence of "the living Christ" in human souls; others mean by it the continued personal existence of Jesus, or what might formerly have been called the immortality of His soul.

We do not for one moment mean to say that these new interpretations of the expression are justifiable in the least. Surely we are bound, in our use of the word "resurrection" as applied to Jesus, by the meaning which the earliest sources attribute to the term. . . .

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that such other uses of

the word, however unjustifiable they may be, are very common at the present time; so that for a man to say that he believes in the "resurrection" of Christ means in itself, prior to careful definition, practically nothing at all.

But it is somewhat different when we come to deal with the virgin birth. If a man affirms that Jesus was born without human father, being conceived by the Holy Ghost in the virgin's womb, it is difficult to see how he can escape the plain meaning of such terms; and thus when he makes that affirmation, he has taken the momentous step of affirming the entrance of the supernatural into the course of the world. . . .

We do not mean that a modern man who accepts the virgin birth has necessarily accepted all of Christianity. Certainly that is far from the case; for sometimes acceptance of the virgin birth is an isolated Christian survival in a man's thinking, which goes along with a rather general rejection of the Christian view of Christ. At any rate, the importance of the virgin birth should never blind our eyes to the importance of other things; and we are in little agreement with those who make the Apostles' Creed, in which the virgin birth is contained, the be-all and the end-all of their Christian profession. Just as important is the Christian doctrine of redemption—the Christian doctrine of sin and grace—about which the Apostles' Creed says scarcely a word.

But the two elements of Christian truth belong logically together; the supernatural Person of our Lord belongs logically with His redemptive work; the virgin birth belongs logically with the Cross. When one aspect is given up, the other will not logically remain; and where one is accepted, the other will naturally be accepted too. There may be halfway positions for a time, but they are in unstable equilibrium and will not long be maintained.

Certain it is that men who reject the virgin birth scarcely ever hold to a really Christian view of Christ. . . . In the overwhelming majority of cases those who reject the virgin birth reject the whole supernatural view of Christ. They often profess belief in the "incarnation"; but the word is apt to mean to them almost the exact opposite of what the New Testament means when it says that "the Word become flesh." To these modern men the incarnation means that God and man are one; to the New Testament it means rather that they are *not* one, but that the eternal Son of God became a man, assumed our nature, by a stupendous miracle, to redeem us from sin. Seldom does any real belief in the incarnation go along with a rejection of the miracle of the virgin birth.

Thus we have held that the virgin birth is important, in the first place, because if it is rejected the authority of the Bible is denied, and, in the second place, because it brings before a man in particularly unambiguous fashion the great question of the supernatural in connection with the person of our Lord. But that is by no means all that needs to be said. . . . On the contrary, it has an importance of its own, which the Christian man can ill afford to miss. Without the story of the virgin birth there would be something seriously lacking in the Christian view of Christ. . . .

Would our knowledge of our Saviour be essentially complete if the New Testament did not contain the passages which narrate the virgin birth? That question, we think,

should be answered with an emphatic negative; without the story of the virgin birth our knowledge of our Saviour would be impoverished in a very serious way. . . .

There would be a serious gap in our knowledge of Him, and questions would arise which would be full of menace for the souls of men. How did this eternal Son of God enter into the world? Did the Son of God unite with the man Jesus at the baptism as the Gnostics supposed; was the man Jesus received up gradually into union with the eternal Son? Erroneous answers to such questions would, without the story of the virgin birth, be all too ready to hand. . . .

Such surmises would deprive us of the full doctrine of the incarnation upon which our souls can rest. To that doctrine it is essential that the Son of God should live a complete human life upon this earth. But the human life would not be complete unless it began in the mother's womb. At no later time, therefore, should the incarnation be put, but at that moment when the babe was conceived. There, then, should be found the stupendous event when the eternal Son of God assumed our nature, so that from then on He was both God and man.

Our knowledge of the virgin birth, therefore, is important because it fixes for us the time of the incarnation. And what comfort that gives to our souls! Marcion, the second-century dualist, was very severe upon those who thought that the Son of God was born as a man; he poured out the vials of his scorn upon those who brought Christ into connection with the birth-pangs and the nine months' time. But we, unlike Marcion and his modern disciples, glory just in the story of those things. The eternal Son of God, He through whom the universe was made, did not despise the virgin's womb! What a wonder is there! It is not strange that it has always given offence to the natural man. But in that wonder we find God's redeeming love, and in that babe who lay in Mary's womb we find our Saviour who thus became man to die for our sins and bring us into peace with God.

Moreover, the knowledge of the virgin birth is important because of its bearing upon our view of the solidarity of the race in the guilt and power of sin. If we hold a Pelagian view of sin, we shall be little interested in the virgin birth of our Lord; we shall have little difficulty in understanding how a sinless One could be born as other men are born. But if we believe, as the Bible teaches, that all mankind are under an awful curse, then we shall rejoice in knowing that there entered into the sinful race from the outside One upon whom the curse did not rest as He bore it for those whom He redeemed by His blood.

How, except by the virgin birth, could our Saviour have lived a complete human life from the mother's womb, and yet have been from the very beginning no product of what had gone before, but a supernatural Person come into the world from the outside to redeem the sinful race? We may not, indeed, set limits to the power of God; we cannot say what God might or might not have done. Yet we can say at least that no other way can be conceived by us. Deny or give up the story of the virgin birth, and inevitably you are led to evade either the high Biblical doctrine of sin or else the full Biblical presentation of the supernatural Person of our Lord. A noble man in whom the divine life merely pulsated in

(continued back cover)

WHAT IS ORTHODOXY?

A Call for Papers for the Fall 1996 Apologetics Seminars of the **Charles Hodge Society**

The theme for the fall 1996 Apologetics Seminars will be orthodoxy as summarized by the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. We would like papers defending the following central themes of the Christian faith. If you feel so inspired, please send a two-three hundred word abstract summarizing the argument for an essay on the relevant subject. It should include mention of the biblical basis for the doctrine, its place in these creeds, and an articulate defense of its truth. If chosen, your paper will be scheduled for a fall meeting of the Apologetics Seminars, with a respondent. We encourage *all* interested students, faculty, administration to submit abstracts, in an effort to establish a real basis for Christian unity at Princeton Theological Seminary. We also welcome submissions from those outside Princeton Theological Seminary.

Please send proposals to Jay Wesley Richards, Princeton Theological Seminary, SBN 372, P.O. Box 821, Princeton, NJ 08542-0803, by **April 15, 1996** for consideration before the end of the Spring term. Proposals are requested on the following topics:

- ◆ God the Almighty Creator
- ◆ The Humanity and Divinity of Christ
 - ◆ The Virgin Birth of Christ
- ◆ The Suffering Atonement of Christ
 - ◆ The Resurrection of Christ
- ◆ The Lordship and Judgment of Christ
 - ◆ The Divine Trinity
 - ◆ The Universal Church
- ◆ Salvation and Everlasting Life
- ◆ The Presence of the Holy Spirit

Thank you,

The Charles Hodge Society

(Continued from p. 44) greater power than in other men would have been born by ordinary generation from a human pair; the eternal Son of God, come by a voluntary act to redeem us from the guilt and power of sin, was conceived in the virgin's womb by the Holy Ghost.

What, then, is our conclusion? Is belief in the virgin birth necessary to every man if he is to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? The question is wrongly put when it is put in that way. Who can tell exactly how much knowledge of the facts about Christ is necessary if a man is to have saving faith? None but God can tell. Some knowledge is certainly required, but exactly how much is required we cannot say. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief," said a man in the Gospels who was saved. So today there are many men of little faith, many who are troubled by the voices that are heard on all sides. It is very hard to be a Christian in these times; and there is One who knows that it is hard. What right have we to say that full knowledge and full conviction are necessary before a man can put his trust in the crucified and risen Lord? . . .

We desire, however, at this point not to be misunderstood. We do not mean by what we have just said that denial of the virgin birth is to be treated as a matter of indifference by the wise pastor of souls. The soul of man in its depths, indeed, is beyond our ken; our judgments regarding those depths are not the judgments of Him who "needed not that any should testify of man," because "He knew what was in man." Yet if we are to help our fellow-men we must give counsel on the basis of the best knowledge that we in our weakness can obtain. And certainly even with that weakness we can say that perhaps not one man out of a hundred of those who deny the virgin birth today gives any really clear evidence of possessing saving faith. A man is not saved by good works, but by faith; and saving faith is acceptance of Jesus Christ "as He is offered to us in the Gospel." Part of that gospel in which Jesus is offered to our souls is the blessed story of the miracle in the virgin's womb.

One thing at least is clear: even if the belief in the virgin birth is not necessary to every Christian, it is certainly

necessary to Christianity. And it is necessary to the corporate witness of the Church. Sad is it when men who will not affirm this doctrine are sent out into the ministry to lead Christ's little ones astray. Such men are learners, it is said; they will grow in knowledge and in grace; let us deal patiently with them and all will be well. Now we have all sympathy with those who are immature in the faith, and we hope that by the blessing of God they may be led into clearer and stronger convictions as to the truth of His Word. But the place for such learning, so far as the basic things are concerned, is not the sacred office of the Christian ministry. Let these men learn first by themselves, let them struggle; and then, if God leads them aright, let them aspire to the holy ministry of the Word. But to send them out before they have attained such convictions, as official representatives of a Church whose faith they do not share—that is simply to trifle with human souls.

Let it not be forgotten that the virgin birth is an integral part of the New Testament witness about Christ, and that that witness is strongest when it is taken as it stands. We are not averse, indeed, to a certain logical order of apologetics; and in that order the virgin birth certainly does not come first. Before the virgin birth come the things for which testimony in the very nature of the case can be more abundant than for this. To those things no doubt the inquirer should be directed first, before he comes to consider this mystery which was first attested perhaps only by the mother of the Lord. But thought that is true, though theoretically a man can believe in the resurrection, for example, without believing in the virgin birth, yet such a halfway conviction is not likely to endure. The New Testament presentation of Jesus is not an agglomeration, but an organism, and of that organism the virgin birth is an integral part. Remove the part, and the whole becomes harder and not easier to accept; the New Testament account of Jesus is most convincing when it is taken as a whole. Only one Jesus is presented in the Word of God; and that Jesus did not come into the world by ordinary generation, but was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the Holy Ghost.

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